Stephen Payne—William Colt MacDonald—Glenn A. Connor

WEST

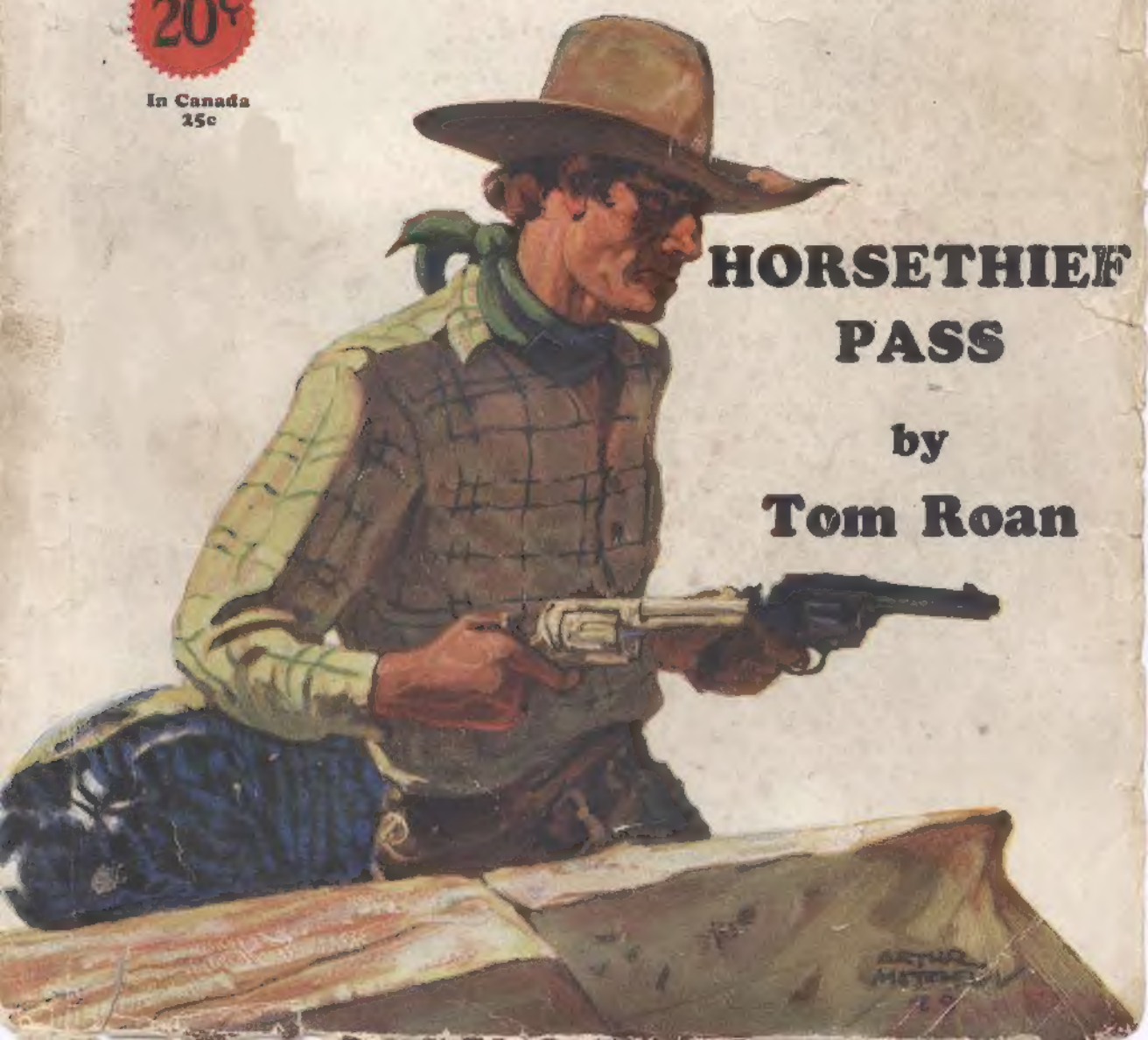
EVERY OTHER WEEK

OCTOBER 2nd

a complete novel

20¢

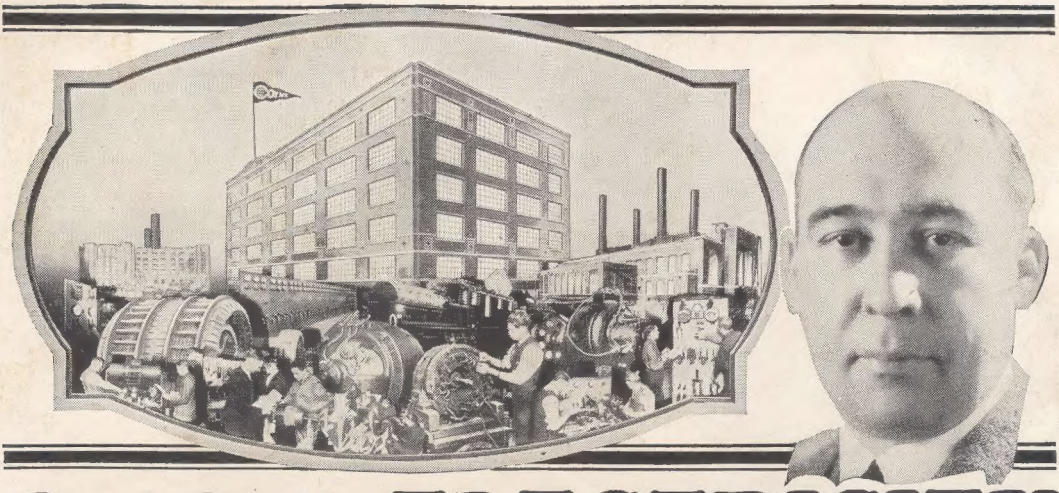
In Canada
25c



HORSETHIEF PASS

by

Tom Roan



Get into ELECTRICITY

Learn in 90 Days--Without Books

Don't spend your life waiting for $5 raises in a dull, hopeless job. Now . . . and forever . . . say good-bye to 25 and 35 dollars a week. Let me show you how to qualify for jobs leading to salaries of $50, $60 and up a week, in Electricity—NOT by correspondence, but by an amazing way to teach, that makes you a practical expert in 90 days! Getting into Electricity is far easier than you imagine! Act now, today!

NEW--Quick Amazingly Easy Method!

Lack of experience—age or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you are 16 years old or 40. It makes no difference. Don't let lack of money stop you. Most men at Coyne have no more money than you have.

Earn While Learning

If you should need part time work, I'll assist you in getting it. Then, in 12 brief weeks in the great roaring shops of Coyne, I'll train you as you never dreamed you could be trained.

No Books

You work on real live electrical machinery, building real batteries, winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring real houses, etc., etc.—here in this world famous parent school, with its hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of new up-to-date electrical equipment.

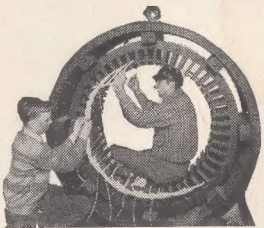
Jobs—Pay—Future

Don't worry about a job. Coyne training settles the job question for life. Clyde F. Hart got a position as electrician with the Great Western Railroad at over $100.00 a week. That's not unusual. We can point to Coyne men making up to $600.00 a month. Easy to get jobs leading to $50 a week and up, while starting your own electrical business puts you in a position to become independent.

Get the Facts

Send now for my big book containing 150 photograph reproductions telling the whole Coyne story. It tells you how many earn expenses while training and all about our lifetime employment service. We are now in our new $2,000,000 school—the finest school in the world devoted to the exclusive training in Electricity.

Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 30 years old—Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt—endorsed by many electrical concerns. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book.



Prepare for Jobs Like These

Here are a few of hundreds of positions open to Coyne-trained men. Our free employment bureau gives you lifetime employment service.

Armature Expert up to $100 a Wk.
Substation Operator to $65 a Wk.
Auto Electrician $60 a Wk. and up
Inventor . . . . . Unlimited
Maintenance Engineer $60 a Week and up
Service Station Owner $60 a Week and up
Radio Expert, $60 a Week and up

Send for Free book

Mr. H. C. LEWIS, *President*
Coyne Electrical School, Dept. 79-88
500 So. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis:—Without obligation send me your big free catalog and details of Free Employment Service, Aviation, Radio and Automotive Courses, and how I can "earn while learning."

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... *State* .....

My Course includes Training in
Aeroplane Electricity

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
H. C. Lewis, Pres. Established 1899
500 Paulina St., Dept. 79-88, Chicago

The Next Issue of WEST Will Appear on the Newsstands Wednesday, October 2nd

Vol. XXII, No. 2 October 2, 1929

WEST

ROY DE S. HORN, *Editor* FREDERICK CLAYTON, *Assoc. Editor*

CONTENTS

Cover Design—"No Surrender" **Arthur Mitchell**

HORSETHIEF PASS (*Complete Novel*) **Tom Roan** **3**
A Texas Ranger bares himself to the fangs of a rattler.

THE STRAY-MAN **Glenn A. Connor** **42**
That J-Six rep sure knows a good kid when he sees one.

BAD MEDICINE **George Bruce Marquis** **51**
Ace Purdy figgers—if one dose does good, two would do better.

GUN JUSTICE (*Part II*) **William Colt MacDonald** **60**
With a song on his lips, Melody Madigan drives into a murderous ambush.

ROOT HOG OR DIE **John Beames** **78**
Barry Lynn does his stuff as a mountain goat.

BOOTS AND BULLETS **Roy W. Rogers** **84**
Happy Jack didn't want to swap boots. But swap bullets? That's different.

THEM WAGON HAMMER CATTLE **Stephen Payne** **90**
Breck Morse stops a cow steal, ties a love knot, and sells a trail herd.

BULLETS FROM THE FOG (*Novelette*) **Ross Ellis** **98**
Steve Maguire's partner in the fish business turns pirate overnight.

ASK ME AN OLD ONE! **123**
A Department of Informal Information.

COME AN' GET IT! **124**

PRIZE LETTER CONTEST **127**

THE LAUGH CORRAL **128**

Copyright, 1929, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.
Title Registered in United States Patent Office.

Geehosifat Jones

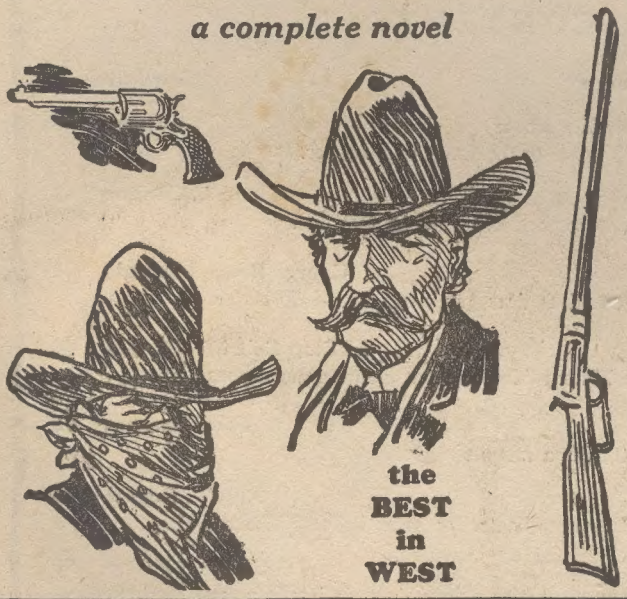
Is Back Again Next Issue!

THE GUNSLICK FROM HELLANGONE

a complete novel

by

George C. Henderson



the BEST in WEST

also in the same issue, stories by:

W. A. Sinclair
Foster-Harris
Colt MacDonald
Jack Wonder
Ralph Cummins
Geo. C. Franklin
and others

Published every other week. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office, Garden City, N. Y. Subscription terms in the United States, Mexico, and American Possessions, $4.00 per year. To Canada, $4.65. To all other countries in the Postal Union, $5.10.

Copyright, 1929, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.

F. N. DOUBLEDAY, *Chairman of the Board*
NELSON DOUBLEDAY, *President*
S. A. EVERITT, *Vice-President*
GEORGE H. DORAN, *Vice-President*
RUSSELL DOUBLEDAY, *Secretary*
JOHN J. HESSIAN, *Treasurer*
LILLIAN A. COMSTOCK, *Asst. Secretary*
L. J. McNAUGHTON, *Asst. Treasurer*

Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.

MAGAZINES

COUNTRY LIFE
WORLD'S WORK
THE AMERICAN HOME
RADIO BROADCAST
SHORT STORIES
LE PETIT JOURNAL
EL ECO
WEST

Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.
BOOK SHOPS (Books of all Publishers)

NEW YORK: LORD & TAYLOR; JAMES McCREERY & COMPANY; PENNSYLVANIA TERMINAL; GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL; 10 WALL ST. & 51 EAST 44TH ST.; 848 MADISON AVE. & 166 WEST 32ND ST.; 420 AND 526 AND 819 LEXINGTON AVENUE
ATLANTIC CITY: 2307 BOARDWALK
CHICAGO: 75 EAST ADAMS STREET
ST. LOUIS: 223 NORTH 8TH STREET; 4914 MARYLAND AVENUE
CLEVELAND: HIGBEE COMPANY
SPRINGFIELD, MASS.: MEEKINS, PACKARD & WHEAT

Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.
OFFICES
GARDEN CITY: NEW YORK
NEW YORK: 244 MADISON AVENUE
BOSTON: PARK SQUARE BUILDING
CHICAGO: PEOPLES GAS BUILDING
SANTA BARBARA, CAL.
LONDON: WM. HEINEMANN, LTD.
TORONTO:
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN AND GUNDY, INC.

WEST
Every Other Week October 2nd

HORSETHIEF PASS

by TOM ROAN

Author of "Black Lightning," "Gun Fodder," etc.

Singlehanded Dash Bender, Texas Ranger, twists the rattles from Rattlesnake Slade, king of outlaws and dictator of Horsethief Pass.

CHAPTER I

THE KILLER

REVOLVING gray streaks of gun smoke hung against the hewn-log rafters and puncheon planks of the Medicine Hat's time-blackened ceiling. The light booted and Stetsoned drinkers who comprised the bulk of the Montana Saturday night spenders had stepped back from the bar. The bartender stood with his hands elevated near the cash register. Four men and four girls at a table opposite the bar had stood up, kicking over a pair of chairs behind them. The Con Kid, who had come to Jumping Horse six months before for his health had turned on his rickety bench at the piano, as the sounds of his rattly music had died with a vibrating crash. One of the girls at the

table opposite the bar started to whimper and suddenly leaned close to her red-faced, bulky-bearded companion who had been buying a round of drinks. The man patted her bare arm semi-consciously, glanced down at her, whispered something in a hoarse tone, and again lifted his head to stare at the crouching figure who stood beyond the upset poker table in the rear of the room just across from the paint-scabbed old piano.

All eyes were focusing their level gaze on that corner. It seemed impossible that Dago Pete Cordoni could die so quickly. Short of body, legs and arms, round-bellied and almost round-headed, his heavy hair a tangled mop of oily-blackness, the man lay flat on his broad back in the wreckage of the chair that had crashed under his weight as he had made his futile, backward jump from the table just as the two licking flames from a roaring Colt's splattered their showering sparks across his chest. His right hand still hung inside the bosom of his blue shirt, a hand that still gripped the butt of a short-barreled Colt's.

Above Dago Pete, muzzle flung upward, a tense thumb gripping the polished hammer, a slender, bloodless hand holding the weapon like a poised adder, the Colt that had snapped out a life with the quickness of striking lightning was waiting, its owner watching the crowd through the slits of a smoky-frost color that marked his eyes, which seemed to be reading the thoughts of everyone in the room.

HE WAS a stranger in Jumping Horse who had dropped the reins of a rangy sorrel at the hitching-rack in rear of the Medicine Hat scarcely two hours before—a tall, loose-jointed individual whose age could have been reckoned between twenty-eight and thirty. His heavy bullhide chaps branded him as a rider from the chaparral country of Texas, as did the double-cinch black saddle of Mexican design and the broad-brimmed, rather low-crowned brown sombrero. Added to these were his brown cigarettes, rolled Mexican fashion, and the lazy drawl of his voice; a voice that had carried no single hint that it belonged to a cold-eyed killer before he had dropped into the chair in the corner to play with Dago Pete.

There was no inkling of what had started the fight. The crowd's first warning of it had been a quick oath, a snarl, and the noise of Dago Pete flinging himself back from the table. In that one wild burst of activity, the stranger had moved. One quick shove had sent the table plunging against Dago Pete. On his feet like a jumping-jack, a six-shooter had come into being in the stranger's hand. His thumb had whipped his hammer two lightning strokes, gun-fanner fashion. Two roars of flame—and Dago Pete was down with two holes jammed close together through his heart!

Only a cool-headed, quick-thinking master gunfighter could have blocked Dago Pete's draw; only a man that could read ever move would have known that Pete was instant-close to making a kill when his hand had slipped casually into the bosom of his shirt. For more than one man had seen Dago Pete's right hand slide into the bosom of his shirt, and an instant later had died, shot dead in their chairs before they had had time to lift their hands. The man who had now bested him whipped his lips with a lashlike movement of his tongue, and spoke, the thin lips appearing to bite out the words.

"I didn't come up here to this Montana country to let anybody make a sap-sucker out 'a me. When a man can't play poker an' lose without wantin' to shoot the winner, it's high time that *hombre* got his belly shoved full a' lead. I reckon some o' you dudes are his friends?"

"It—it ain't our row," stammered Wesley Jones, the bartender, slowly lowering his hands and sending a quick glance at two men in the crowd in front of the bar.

"Now maybe it ain't, but maybe you'd make it yo'rn if I'd turn my back, fella!" The killer's voice still carried its lazy drawl. "I reckon I *sabe* a few of the things what go on in these parts. This dude," he bobbed his head toward the down man, "owns half this dump, an' if I stand here an' argue long enough, I might get a rope wropped 'round my neck.

"An' some o' yuh gents might try stoppin' me when I start slidin' out'a here," he went on, lips twisting into a queer, mirthless little grin. "That's gonna set plum' bad on somebody's stomach, 'cause I'm gonna blast holes in the belly of the gent what does try to follow me."

He started side-stepping toward the

door, his left hand feeling along the wall, the right one keeping its Colt uptilted, his eyes almost furious with their sweeping, darty glances. He reached the edge of the door, and halted.

"I reckon it'd be sorter foolish for me to tell yuh that I caught the Dago *hombre* slippin' a deck from his sleeve." A silky little laugh warped his lips. "I called 'im low an' gentle-like. His eyes burned holes in my face, an' he started like he was gonna scratch his belly. I knowed the trick—an' beat 'im to it. If yore sheriff's right hot under the collar when he gets here, you can tell him that Wade Steel, the best bronc scratcher an' bronc rustler what ever rid all the way from Southwest Texas, dropped in to see his town."

With a quick step, he was in the doorway. A backward jump carried him outside. His long-shanked spurs rattled on the hard-packed ground. A horse snorted, a saddle squeaked. Hoofs drummed a fierce tune, and he was gone, riding like wind toward Horsethief Pass, the lofty range of black mountains north of the town.

Chapter II

JAKE SLADE

TO SHAME the devil an' spite hell an' all the dudes shovelin' brimstone down there, Horsethief Pass was made—an' Rattlesnake Jake Slade stuck right in the middle of it."

Such was the blasphemy a dying old rustler, lying on his back with a gone-out cigarette between his bloody lips and a bullet hole through his lungs, had placed on Horsethief Pass. Others had died heaping oaths upon it. Jake Slade had never met the man he could trust "further than the end o' my nose." Men knew him from Sonora to the Hudson Bay as a dyed-in-the-wool double-crosser.

"All yuh gotta do is to stay with 'im long enough," said men who had been with him, "an' he'll get yuh. The man ain't born what can put trust in Jake Slade an' win. He uses his men from start to finish, an' busts their backbones where their suspenders cross when he's through with 'em."

And yet men rode for Jake Slade, fought for him, died for him!

"Some day, somebody'll get 'im!"

Such had been the saying for thirty years, yet Slade had lived. He had grown fat with the wealth of his mountain retreat, and had watched the men die who had prophesied his downfall. His lair was the den of the lion, the mountain goat and the nest of the eagle. For a mile straight up the spiraling peaks and cloud-ringed cliffs thrust themselves in the sky like guarding gray and black ghosts. There were no visible trails. Only dangerous ledges marked the way, and there were hundreds of them that crawled drunkenly along the faces of sheer cliffs to end only in thin air; the same blue patches of air that law officers, hot on the trail of wanted men known to be making their way to Jake Slade, had so often looked upon and been forced to turn back empty-handed.

To find the way to the fertile valleys deep in the mountain's heart, one had to know the way, and Jake Slade had to *know* the men who sought the shelter of his stronghold when they arrived. Expert riflemen, men who watched men from the outer world with shifty eyes that read every hand's move and weighed every carelessly dropped word, guarded the passages as narrow as knife blades and studied every newcomer's face over the elevated muzzle of a Winchester.

ONCE through the tortuous passages, the newcomer's eyes looked upon a dozen hidden valleys that were as green as emeralds and slashed with crystal-clear streams fringed with cottonwoods and willow thickets. Blue-joint grass whipped every passing stirrup on the valley floors, while buckbrush blanketed the slopes and chokeberry bushes grew riotously in the swamp flats. Deer loped the valley, and goats, sheep and other game frequented the ledges. Until late fall the bog lands and swamps were filled with wild geese and ducks, fool hens and chickens keeping to the levels further back. If ever a rustler hard-pressed by the law looked upon a horse heaven, the heart of Horsethief Pass—twenty miles long and twenty miles wide—was one, a hole-up place for a wanted man to hide a day or a year.

Each valley had its own stout set of cabins made of hewn logs and roofed with sod where hard-eyed men talked but little, wore their guns strapped low, ate, slept, and watched stolen herds of fine horses. But the main valley, surrounded by the other valleys, was the hole-in-the-wall of Jake Slade.

Locked in by five-hundred foot cliffs that were broken at the north and south, permitting easy passage to the other valleys, surrounded by men who hated him with all their hearts and souls, and yet men who would die for him because he was the man who cheated them, whipped them and protected them, Slade's valley was The Roost, the store, the saloon where evil whiskey could be had for fifty cents a drink.

A bubbly stream, hurrying like a yard-wide mill-race, ribboned the valley from end to end, its banks fringed with cottonwoods, red willows, wild rose and chokeberry bushes. In the middle of the valley, set up on either side of the stream, stood the log-walled and sod-roofed buildings. A Tongue River Indian squaw, a dish-faced woman of forty who could handle a shotgun loaded with buckshot as well as any horsethief that ever set foot in The Roost, cooked Slade's meals, mended his socks, fed, watered and cared for his private string of saddle horses, and raised his six half-breed children that played or fought in the street.

HATING every man he met, being hated in return by everything that came in contact with him, it was in this hell-hole of damned and wanted men that Jake Slade was king. Even his squaw must have hated him. It was the kick from one of his heavy boots that often knocked her off her feet or an open-handed cuff that left her muttering for days over her duties and her jaws puffed as though suffering from a severe case of mumps. On rare occasions he caressed her with his one manifestation of love by sitting beside her and rubbing the back of her ponderous neck.

He was a huge man, though short. His legs were stumpy, like his great, hairy arms. He never shaved. It's doubtful that he ever washed his face, though the bristly black hair and beard kept its stubby length by frequent cutting with the pair of black-handled clippers lying on the back bar. Bullet-headed, always snagging a quid of black tobacco and allowing the spittle to seep down either side of his chin from the corners of his wide and sullen mouth, his left eye was cocked, the other black and beady. His beet-red nose was bulbous, the wide nostrils sky-flaring.

"An uglier human bein' never walked on two legs!" had once said an old horsethief, stopping over for a week on a law-dodging dash toward Old Mexico. "He'll die one o' these days an' the Devil's gonna think he's got D. T.'s when he sees Jake comin' sash-shayin' into Hell."

He had crawled out of his bunk just as the first faint streaks of dawn were catching the cliff-tops of his valley in soft reins of light, and was leaning on the bar, sucking at a gone-out, short, black pipe. A rattly sound of approaching hoofbeats caused him to slide out from behind the bar. He walked to the door of the saloon, then stopped short, his stumpy legs braced wide apart, bullet-head jerked forward, mouth open with surprise. An oath trembled his thick lips. Head still down, one eye staring skyward, the other's gaze fixed upon a galloping horseman, his right hand dropped quickly to the black butt of the long Colt at his hip, the stubby fingers closing upon it like an unwashed talon.

CHAPTER III

THE PLOTTERS

STANDING directly in front of the main cabins—with the yard-wide stream running noisily between and spanned by a broad culvert of stones covered with hard-packed earth—the saloon sat on the east side of the stream where the spreading limbs of the great cottonwoods licked its sod roof. A hitching-rack stood at either side of the broad doorway, the long pine poles lying atop their stout posts on a line with the side logs of the building. It was at the rack on the right side of the door that the stranger pulled his long-legged sorrel to a halt. He swung loosely out of his saddle. Hitching up his chap's belt, he sauntered forward.

"Howdy!"

Jake Slade had not moved. He was standing there with his stumpy legs still braced wide apart, bullet head still tilted forward, dirty hand at rest on his six-shooter's black butt. His right eye was a mere pin point of smoky light, the left one open wide and appearing to stare at something up in the trees. It seemed a half-minute before he returned the stranger's greeting.

The stranger had halted, frowning at the delay. Slade's one good eye seemed

to be trying to peer through the black silk bosom of the man's shirt front. He had noted every move, the loose-jointed dismounting, the indifferent manner in which the belt of the bullhide chaps had been hitched up. Not a single movement of the stranger's body had escaped the set stare of that smoky right eye. He saw the stranger's hands and the loose, gangly arms. He saw the stubbon chin, the lean, square jaw, the thin lips and the knife-like crack that marked the mouth. The smoky eye met the lead-gray eyes, seemed to stare straight into their depths.

Finally Slade's thick lips opened sullenly, the words that came from them appearing to slip like melted butter out of the corners of his mouth above the streaks of tobacco spittle that dropped away on either side of his stern, tight-skinned chin.

"Howdy, an' who are yuh, pardner?"

"I'm the dude," grinned the stranger, mirthlessly, "what some folks send for when they find they've bit off a heap more'n they can chaw. I've had a heap o' handles to be called by, but I reckon yo're Rattlesnake Slade. I reckon you ain't holdin' no grudge ag'in yo're name?"

"Maybe I am; maybe I ain't." Slade's sky-flaring nostrils quivered to the slightest degree with slow-kindling anger. "Some folks, mostly young squirts like yourself, have called me *Rattlesnake* to my teeth. That's why we started the graveyard over yonder." He pointed toward a black knoll beyond the main cabins. "We found that that loose gumbo dug easier. My name is Jake—Jake Slade. I hope yore memory don't fail yuh."

"All o' which reminds me," answered the newcomer, arrogantly, "that a dude by the name o' *Rattlesnake* Slade sent for me 'cause my brains are a few shades smarter than his'n on some things. 'Pears to me I've met the snake, himself, an' the snake's sorter muley. I heard you get thataway by spells an' lunges. So do I, but I ain't in no shape to stand an' pick a row the minute I drift in here. You can't bluff me; you can't scare me. I wasn't raised thataway. Folks gettin' gay with me an' tryin' to cut up are what put so many notches on my gun I had to buy a new one. My name's Wade Steel. If you don't like it, you can go to hell, *Snake* Slade."

"Steel?" Slade's bullet head jerked forward, the right eye widening. "You Wade Steel?" He advanced quickly, his right hand shoved forward. "Shake! Why didn't yuh say yuh was Steel?"

"'Cause yuh didn't ax in the right way," grinned the newcomer, gripping the out-thrust hand. "I ain't had no breakfast, an' I ain't had my mornin' dram."

"Fannydog!" Slade stepped back a pace, lifting his voice into a boom. His ponderous squaw appeared in the doorway of the largest cabin beyond the little creek. "Knock a snack o' breakfast together!" Then, to Steel, "Come right in, pardner. I been waitin' for yuh for more'n a month. Heard yuh turned down my offer an' wasn't comin'. Come in! I got the same brand o' red whiskey that nature pours in the blood o' wildcats just to make 'em spry. Best stuff west o' the old Missouri, even if my squaw did make it!"

SAVE for a lean-to at the rear that was used for the storage of extra supplies, the saloon was one big room. One could have called it a grocery, a clothing store, saddlery shop, and a club room. The floor was of dirt except for the six-foot-wide tiling of cobblestones in front of the bar. A wide-mouthed, roughly-masoned fireplace was on the north side of the room. A few hand-made chairs and a rough bench sat in front of it, surrounding a big, square card table. Over the fireplace hung the mounted head of a big grizzly, an excellent piece of workmanship. Over the front door in a deer-horn rack hung an old buffalo gun. Above it hung a buffalo head, a relic of the '80's. Other odd trinkets were here and there, showing that Jake Slade had a flair for decorations that would give his place the flavor of an old-time Western barroom.

The sides and ends of the bar were faced with hewn cottonwood logs, its top covered with heavy planking. A long shelf with a bullet-cracked mirror above it formed the back-bar, the shelf covered with caddies of chewing tobacco and cartons of smoking. Among these stood a dozen different kinds of bottles, all filled with the same brand of whiskey.

Across the rear of the room stood the store counter. Like the bar, it was

faced with hewn cottonwood logs topped with heavy planks, the brown dirt floor for six feet in front of it covered with flagstones. Behind it were the big shelves. One end of them was jammed full of clothing, shirts, cheap trousers, jumper-coats, makinaws, hats, socks, underwear, boots, spurs, horseshoes, nails, cartridges, saddle gear and saddle blankets. Among all that conglomeration of store stuff were tins of food, flour, beans, sugar, coffee—a complete line of groceries to be sold over a small pair of scales in the corner that weighed five pounds for four.

"A man on the dodge, gettin' his damn neck protected from a rope, ain't got no kick when he comes to prices," grumbled Slade to his customers when they complained. "If your belly gits a notion it can't stand beef, venison or goat three times a day, then it's gonna cost yuh a dollar sixty a pound for bacon."

Slade led the way, shuffling behind the dirty counter of puncheon planks and setting out a squat brown bottle. The newcomer poured himself a drink and downed it.

"Ain't you drinkin'?" demanded the newcomer. "I don't reckon I mind takin' the first one alone, but I get sorter lonesome atter the first quart's down."

Slade chuckled and poured himself a drink.

"How'd yuh get by my man in the pass?" he demanded.

"Showed him yore letter. How'd you expect? Think I flew over him when I looked up an' saw him standin' there behind a rock with a Winchester lined-up on my middle?"

"Yuh mean to tell me," Slade's right eye drew into a squint, the left one, its muscles useless, retaining its upward glaring, "that yuh packed that letter all the way from Texas to Montana with that map inside it?"

"Why not?" grunted the newcomer. "If you didn't mean for me to use that map, why'd you send it?"

"I thought yuh'd remember the trail after studyin' the map. Hell an' damn, fella, what would'a happened if yuh-d got shot-up somewhere an' that letter an' map been found on yuh?"

"But I didn't get shot up, hard as a fella tried it in Jumpin' Hoss, an' I didn't let nobody take it off'n me. Seems to me you yelled somethin' to a squaw across the crick? I'm hungry. If that squaw ain't died on the job, breakfast ought'a be waitin' over there for me."

IT WAS over the big table in one end of the main cabin's long kitchen, with Wade Steel busy with a venison steak and a mug of coffee as black as ink, that Jake Slade plunged abruptly into the business at hand.

"I sent for yuh because they tell me yuh can change any brand man ever put on a hoss or cow," explained Slade, sipping at a mug filled with equal parts of coffee and whiskey. "Then there's another thing. They tell me yuh can get stuff across the border into Old Mexico when ever'body else gets shot or slammed in jail tryin'. That job I got for yuh is the biggest thing yuh've ever had, I reckon, but they pay'll be top."

"One job looks like another job to me," grinned the man from Texas. "Big or little don't count. Yuh said in yore letter you'd heard o' me pushin' good saddle stuff right through this country. Yuh might'a wondered why I never dropped in to see yuh, but I just didn't 'cause I had a job to do. You've never hear'n o' nobody knockin' over Wade Steel with a string o' ponies what were hot on his hands. I can do anything you'd like to have done, but, Rattlesnake, I come high on pay!"

"I told yuh in my letter there'd be a thousand in it, cold cash, when yuh fixed certain brands, an' I told yuh there'd be another thousand in it when yuh landed a certain buch o' stuff where I told yuh to land it. If yuh double-cross me, I'll kill yuh."

"Which is a game a couple o' men can play!" snapped Steel, his lips smiling and his eyes giving the lie to the smile as he looked steadily into the smoky eye that stared back at him. "Yuh don't wanta get the idea o' measurin' my feathers in yore own sack. Nobody ridin' a long trail with Wade Steel has ever said he'd double-cross 'em. That's more'n I can say about you, Rattlesnake."

"I told yuh I don't hanker for anybody to call me that name!" snapped Slade, the one good eye looking suddenly hot.

"So I'm rememberin'," grinned the eating man. "On the other hand, I reckon we might as well know each other now as anytime. I ain't never hear'n yuh called nothin' but *Rattlesnake* Slade. I

reckon I never saw a man what a name fitted better—looks or acts. But I ain't aimin' to call you that just to rile you. I does it accidental-like—an' 'cause I sorter like the sound of it. Yo're low down, mean an' ornery. Most everybody that's ever heard o' you will say that. You'd cut my throat if there was any money in the job. I'd gut-shoot you for fifty cents and general principles.

"You know you can't pull anything down Texas way without losin' on the deal. There's so many men down there you've double-crossed in yore day, Rattlesnake. They'd get next, an' they'd block yuh just to get even. Ary one of 'em would set John Law in on yore show, an' you know it. They don't set the law on you up here 'cause they wanta keep this place as a hole-up spot when they're passin' through this way. An' 'cause you can't run nothin' south, yuh sent for me. I'm in on the deal a'ready, you see.

"But about callin' you Rattlesnake, I hope you don't get all het up over it. If you do, it's just gonna be mighty bad. I didn't come up here to kill you. I come to work a deal with you. Pass the bottle."

SLADE'S answer to the man's lengthy outburst was delayed. Jake Slade was a patient man. In his own words, "men a lota times come tuh The Roost tuh shoot off a lota bazzoo from the lip." He had heard bazzoo all his life. The man in front of him, he reasoned, was but another "bazzoo artist." But there was work for that bazzoo artist, and Slade picked his words carefully. After the work was done, then other things could be done. Men were taught manners in The Roost only after their services were no longer needed.

"But about a thousand bucks here an' a thousand after the job's done," the man from Texas rambled on. "I ain't after chicken feed. You gotta mighty big joker up yore sleeve, Rattlesnake. I sorter think I know what that joker is. Mostly a string o' race horses, to be correct, Huh?"

The man from Texas laughed thickly, reaching for the bottle again. Slade watched him down a half-tumbler of the raw liquor as though it were so much water; watched him set the bottle down with an unsteady hand; watched him attempt to pick up his fork a second time before his fingers closed on it.

"Yo're gonna make big money. I want a big cut. Three thousand cold bucks, anyhow."

"Who told you there was any race stock connected?" asked Slade, mildly, good eye watching every expression on the face across from him with the sharp stare of an eagle.

"Guessed it!" laughed Steel, reaching for the bottle again. "A certain dude was passin' through this country with a string o' race stock a shade better'n two months ago. Certain dudes were waitin' for him south o' here. He was never seen after he hit the badland country north o' Horsethief Pass, Slade. Which means you got him an' them fine broncs." He laughed thickly. "But no hard feelin'!" He picked up the bottle. "Have a shot!"

"I got enough for now," grumbled Slade. "From your look, yuh got a-plenty. You take a sleep. I'll take care o' yore hoss. Fannydog! Feed that bronc outside!" His voice boomed as he called out to his squaw, then he turned back to his guest. "Sleep'll do you good. Does any man good what'll let whiskey run to his head. When yuh've had a nap, I'll talk business with yuh. By then, some o' the other boys will be in."

"Uh-huh, Rattlesnake, but I didn't ride all the way from the border to talk to yore hired help." The man laughed thickly, clawing at the bottle again. "I come here to do business with one Rattlesnake Slade. It'll be *me* an' you who do business. Have a shot!"

IF EVER a man seemed suddenly to become drunk, it was the man from Texas, but Slade made no comment. He was well pleased with himself. In front of him, rousing drunk, he thought, was a man whose record as a gunfighter was an open book to every man who rode the long trails by night and dodged law officers by day. In front of him was a master in the art of brand-changing and brand-running; a man who was hand in glove with certain officials on the Mexican border; a man who could do anything under the sun—and get away with it! That thing that had become as drunk as a fool with a few drinks of straight whiskey!

That thing would be wet clay to be handled and shaped as a wise man saw fit. Jake Slade had met his kind before. Pay it two or three thousand dollars cold cash? Never! He would use

that thing as he had used a hundred other men before he had ever thought of Wade Steel!

"Come on outa here!" commanded Slade a few moments later. "I'm stickin' yuh off in a cabin so's yuh can sleep that booze outa your system. Next time I wanta talk business with yuh, I'll see that there ain't no booze left 'round handy. Come on! Try'n get your legs under yuh!"

Ten minutes later, as limber as a rag, snoring before Slade could close the door and shuffle outside, the newcomer to The Roost was sprawling flat on his face in a smelly bunk in one of the cabins west of the little creek and at the head of the street. Grumbling oaths, Slade was shuffling off down the street, going back to his saloon.

When Slade's footsteps had become a dull sound, the newcomer lifted his head. A pair of gray eyes raised themselves to the line of a crack between the cabin logs where the mud and moss chinking had dropped away. The man's lips curved. A whispered oath came from him. The six-shooters in his holsters had been taken away from him, but inside his bosom, strapped tightly against the skin, a pair of .45 Colt automatic pistols were waiting for their master's unerring hands to command them to strike sudden death to the men he had ridden a long trail to meet face to face.

Chapter IV

THE PRISONER

ARMED with the inevitable Colt at his right hip, and with a six-foot blacksnake whip coiled around his saddle horn, it was three hours after the sun flung its red rays on the cliffs eastward that Jake Slade mounted a high-spirited, milky-white stallion to set off at a gallop up the valley while Fannydog, his squaw, stolidy accepted full responsibility for The Roost.

Slade was in good spirits. He had twice visited his guest in the little cabin at the north end of The Roost's broad "street." At his second visit, finding his guest sprawled on the rickety bunk just as he had dropped him, Slade had returned the six-shooters to the man's holsters.

"I'd laff myself sick if anybody ever hears that I sneaked a pair o' guns off'n a duck like that," he told himself. "Four or five drinks an' him drunker'n hell! Still, I've allus heard that Wade Steel was one dude what couldn't hold his whiskey. Men what are sometimes so good at one thing ain't so good at others. A lota brag to that duck, just like I've allus heard. A man with a lot'a shoot-off at the mouth comes easy for me. Me pay him good money! Me, what's outbrained all the birds that's come my way thinkin' they was smart!"

The horse kept up his swinging gait until they passed out of the main valley into the cracklike pass north of The Roost. Grayish walls of rock loomed on either side now like curtains blotting out the morning sunlight. Twisting right and left, the pass suddenly opened into a narrow valley where spiraling peaks spiked the cliff-tops and thrust their needle points into the sky like dirty blades.

Slade careened to one side in his saddle, feeling for his black plug of chewing tobacco. A short time later, he was entering another cracklike passage where the sunlight was once more blotted from view. Following the twists and abrupt turns, he swung his horse suddenly to the left, forcing the high-strung animal into a clump of thick pines that covered the mouth of a little opening that branched away from the main passage.

The place was almost like a tunnel. Brush and high ledges above darkened the way. At times the passage was so narrow Slade had to lift his stumpy legs and throw them across the bulges on either side of his saddlehorn to keep them from being scraped against the sides of the crevice. At the end of two hundred yards, he pushed the horse through another clump of brush and was in the open again, this time in a small, bowl-like valley ringed with shelves and brittle ledges that seemed to wind upward until they cut themselves into the very heavens. The valley was scarcely five hundred yards across, merely an ugly hole in the earth like an extinct volcano's crater. At its west side, almost hidden by rocks and brush, the end logs of a sod-roofed cabin badly in need of repair showed ahead. Slade spurred his horse into a gallop. He pulled to a halt in front of the cabin's down door, and sat there looking at the man in front of him, his thick lips spreading into a snag-toothed grin.

The prisoner was about thirty years old. Face swollen, his unkempt black hair matted with dried blood, the man seemed in a daze. He was in chains and padlocks. One end of the longest chain was fastened around his ankle, the other end held in the top of a big pine stump by a stout staple. With wrists shackled close together, his face bearded, unwashed and seared by half-healed stripes, the man did not move. He sat there staring up at the horseman, his gray eyes glittering cruelly from their swollen slits.

SLADE removed a hot, greasy sack from the cantle of his saddle. He tossed it forward, like a man throwing a bone to a hound. The man in chains picked it up greedily. He hesitated for a moment as he opened the sack. He looked up, slits of eyes glittering with hate.

"A good steak this mornin'," chuckled Slade. "A heap more'n yuh deserve for yuhr damn stubborn ways, Jim Bender. But I feed yuh, anyhow, to keep yuh alive like I keep my dogs an' hosses alive."

He spat out his chew of tobacco, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and filled his short pipe. With the white stallion grazing close by, he sat there on a small pine stump smoking slowly. He had dropped his dilapidated black hat in the grass beside him. The blacksnake whip hung coiled on his left wrist.

The prisoner ate greedily of the big venison steak and baking powder biscuits. When he had finished, he stood up as if every bone in his body ached and walked over to a small bowl-like spring of water between two rocks. He drank slowly, then straightened, the long chain fastened to his ankle clinking as it followed him back to the stump.

"Ready to talk a little business this mornin'?" demanded Slade, toying with the blacksnake on his wrist. "A breakfast like that oughta set well. I got yuh, anyhow. Yuh'll dance to my tune sooner or later."

"And when I do, Jake Slade," the prisoner spoke slowly, as if his swollen jaws and cheeks made speaking difficult, "I know I'm going to die soon afterward. That's patent. You'd have to kill me to carry out the rest of your thieving ideas. If you were not a cold-blooded, sick-livered and cringing coward, you would have killed me long ago.

"I don't expect to live," he went on, his voice strangely quiet. "I fully expect to die here chained to this damned stump. But listen to me, Slade, you will never live to see the day when you can look upon a Bender and watch his guts turn to water!"

"Maybe not!" An ugly light smoldered and shone in the smoky eye, his heavy lips appearing to tighten across his tobacco-stained stumps of teeth. "At that I've seen yuh cringe an' twist at that stump like a dyin' snake. I've seen yuh bawl tears like a spanked baby. I've see'd yuh wince, twist, squirm an' turn while yuh let blubberin' sounds come out'a your lips like a calf under its first brandin' iron. Yuh can't beat me out, Jim Bender.

"My deal is straight an' quick," he went on, doggedly, speaking slowly as if to allow every word to make an impression. "Yuh had twenty thousand dollars on yuh a few hours 'fore my boys dropped in on your camp. You was sorter skeered somebody would drop in on yuh, 'cause yuh knowed yuh was near my country with them fine broncs. Before yuh crawled into your blankets, yuh ditched the money somewhere an' somehow. Yuh have a notion yuh'll make a big break an' get away from me; then yuh think yuh'll dig back to where yuh hid that coin, break it out'a your cache, an' keep a-goin'.

"But I'll tell yuh ag'in, Jim Bender," he shook his stubby forefinger slowly, threateningly, "that I ain't a man to set my mind an' change it. There's plenty men planted in the ground in Hossthief Pass what tried to buck Jack Slade. I ain't never started somethin' I didn't finish. All your fancy race broncs are as good as mine a'ready. 'Fore yuh know it, them brands are gonna be changed, then them broncs will go where I want 'em to go. I ain't fool enough to think I can go out an' enter 'em on any track, but I can get big cash for 'em from certain men who will enter 'em."

JIM BENDER swore inwardly. Fate had been kind to his companions, to little Sam Saylor and tall, good-natured Old Mat Wall, for the two men had died a quick, almost painless death the night Jake Slade's riders had so suddenly appeared like killer ghosts upon the little camp beside

the alkali waterhole in the badlands north of Horsethief Pass.

Both had come leaping out of their blankets with a six-shooter in each hand as the first thunder of midnight guns had shattered the silence of the star-shot night. Both men had died simple deaths, Old Mat careening back on his blankets, Little Sam making one short grunt of pain as a bullet slapped a hole through his heart and sent him pitching head first into the sand. Old Mat, just before he had died, in one fleetful moment of consciousness, had called out in his last breath and in a voice of heart-bleeding agony, "Don't give in, Jim!"

Abused, beaten, starved and kicked, there had been many times when Jim Bender felt his spirit breaking with despair. Never to surrender was his last aim in life. He steeled himself night and day, in hours of unconsciousness and in spells of bitter agony when a blacksnake whip tore at him like a plucking vulture coming too soon for the dead. There were times when he felt that he could not stand the strain, but always he heard that voice: "Don't give in, Jim!"

He could not give in. To give in would be to profane the dead; to be a traitor to the cold blood that now lay somewhere in the ground.

That cry was keeping Jim Bender alive. It was a live thing that came to him in an undying voice from a shallow grave in the badlands. It was stronger than the love of life. It was the voice of the dead giving him strength to carry on and filling him with a madman's power to withstand his daily abuse. Without it he would have broken long before.

"You don't seem to be in a bad humor this morning," said Bender, breaking a long, ominous silence. "Must have had a good night's sleep."

"I did, an' my humor's fine." Slade removed his empty pipe from his mouth as he spoke. "It's you what's botherin' me, Bender. Not that I don't know I'll make yuh come to turn 'fore I'm done. That I'll do! I know I'll do it. But yuh keep on bein' a fool. Yuh've got sand. I know yuh've got it, an' I give yuh credit for havin' it. You an' me only play a game. I hold a pat hand. Yuh know I hold it. I can set here an' peck the eyes out'a your head with this whip o' mine. It darts where I want it to dart.

"But I'm gonna save yuh for a while, Jim Bender!" The smoky eye seemed to glow with kindling fire. "I'm gonna fatten yuh up. Yuh've got a job in front o' yuh. When yuh face it, you'll admit that yuh ain't never seen nothin' or heard nothin' in all your life."

He laughed harshly and stood up quickly. He moved over to his horse, picking up the animal's reins. A slow breath of relief escaped Bender. It was to be another morning that he would escape punishment.

"Eat, sleep an' be merry!" grinned the horsethief as he climbed into his big saddle. "'Fore many days, Jim Bender, I'm gonna buckle yuh to your knees. It ain't the money I'm wantin' so bad. It's that high-headed way o' your'n when I'm gonna break. Killin' yuh would be easy. A bullet stuck between your eyes—an' yuh'd be done. But I got another man what I want yuh to meet. I reckon yuh've heard a heap o' that dude. What he didn't learn from the *spics* an' Indians down Mexico way ain't to be learned. Yuh'll be apt to know 'im when yuh meet, 'cause your both from that part o' the country, an' Wade Steel's name is right prominent to most folks from Texas."

Chapter V

A MAN DIES

FOUR men who had been on guard in the exits of the outer valleys all night rode into The Roost. They were queer-eyed, level-browed men who spoke in low voices from a force of habit. Dropping reins at the hitching-racks, they sauntered into the saloon. Each man seemed to hesitate in the doorway, eyes sweeping the room—another habit. All nodded to Fannydog and ordered a drink. They were sitting at the big card table in front of the fireplace when Jake Slade galloped up, yelled for Fannydog to take his horse, and came banging inside with his big spurs dragging on the floor.

"Mornin'!" boomed Slade. "Ain't yuh gone to your bunks yet?"

"In 'em an' done sound asleep," grinned a short, black-bearded, heavily-muscled man of forty. "Only we thought it bein' Sunday that yuh'd buy a drink. A man gets dry these long nights, yuh see." He winked at his companions.

"Belly up to the bar!" ordered Slade as Fannydog left the room. "I 'spect The Roost feels spry this mornin'. You'll

find a new dude in your bunk, Five Spot." He was speaking to the black-bearded individual now. "I didn't tell 'im it was your bunk, but thinkin' that yuh've allus been spoutin' 'bout what a good friend Wade Steel is to yuh—well, I shoved him in your bunk to sleep off a jag he got on when he tried to drink with me."

"Yuh mean Wade blowed in?" Five Spot Reed's eyes widened with pleasant surprise. "Yuh ain't jokin' us, Jake?"

"I ain't, but don't go draggin' him out until he has about four hours o' sleep. He drifts in early, has a few drinks—an' passes out complete. Never saw a man liquor could hit so quick."

"Wade never could drink," answered Reed, filling his glass from the black bottle Slade had slid upon the bar. "One drink an' he's started drunk. Two drinks and he's well on his way. After the fifth or sixth his legs go out from under him."

Ten minutes later, leaving the others drinking behind him, Five Spot Reed left the room. He led his horse across the creek to the haystack corral behind the main cabin. Unsaddling the animal and turning him into the corral, he hurried to the cabin at the head of the street. He stepped through the open door and moved quietly toward the loose figure on the bunk. Five feet away from the bunk, he halted with a jerk, his hands flinching.

The man on the bunk had suddenly sat up. A hand had jerked downward and upward. A silver mounted six-shooter's muzzle stared Reed in the pit of the stomach. Reed's eyes suddenly widened, his hands slowly raised, and he whispered in a voice harsh with fear, "Yuh—you here?"

"Easy, damn you!" hissed the man on the bunk, getting to his feet slowly. "If you open your mouth to make a sound I'll blow your thick tongue through the back of your head, Five Spot Reed!"

REED was like a man in a daze for a moment, then he moved with startling rapidity, throwing himself to one side, right hand flinging toward the black butt of one of his six-shooters. A roar of flame tore at him and seemed to burst like a red rocket flattening itself across his mouth. His hands dropped. Mouth gushing a stream of red, he started reeling. Like a spinning top beginning to weave and wabble, he went staggering toward the head of the room. In an instant more he was down on his back, legs kicking outward, needle-pointed rowels of his big spurs raking lines in the heavy planks of the puncheon floor.

"Damn you!" whispered the man with the warm Colt, "I told you what would happen!"

A bellow of noise came from the directions of the saloon. Moving backward hurriedly, Steel placed his eyes to the little crack in the logs at the head of his bunk. Three men, followed by Jake Slade, were hurrying out the door of the saloon. The man with the warm Colt studied each man's face until they were getting close to the cabin. Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he whirled back to the dead man and started lifting his voice in a ringing outburt of loud oaths.

"You think you could stick yore hand out to mine? You think I didn't have sense enough to figure out the deal you handed me? You knew I'd kill you! I told you a long time ago that no man ever double-crossed Wade Steel an' got away with it!"

"What's goin' on here?" thundered Slade, suddenly appearing in the doorway, his three companions having halted behind him.

"What's goin' on?" The killer's voice was thick. He wabbled toward the door, six-shooter still in his hand, lips loose, words thick and drunken. "What' goin' on, huh? Well, I've just killed a rat, that's all, an' there," he waved the six-shooter behind him, "he lies!"

"That—that man," Slade's face was as red as a beet, "said you was his best friend!"

"Shore!" Wade Steel laughed drunkenly. "Shore he was! He double-crossed a man who was my friend. Shipped him across the border one night an' had the law pick him up on the other side. That rat," again he waved the six-shooter at the down man, "got one thousand dollars for that job!

"I bumped his wad!" he rushed on, voice thick, body weaving. "Shore, I did! He comes shovin' in here, wakin' me up an' stickin' out his hand. Damn glad to see me, he was. Thinkin' I didn't know him an' what he's done. I—"

"Listen to me, fella!" Slade's voice lifted to a dangerous pitch, the right eye

appearing smoky hot. "I does the killin's 'round this place. Jake Slade, yuh see?" He tapped his chest with a forefinger, bullet head drawn forward, lips warped bitterly.

"So I reckon!" An ugly, drunken-sounding laugh came with the words. "Only Rattlesnake Slade does the killin'! What a hell of a fine joke on Rattlesnake Slade!"

A rush of unsteady laughter came from him. Six-shooter still in his hand, he leaned against the door jamb. Slade was speechless for the moment. He was just standing there, his hand opening and closing, lips twisted as if trying to hold back words. Finally he spoke. He mastered his words with an effort that reddened his face.

"Pardner, yuh work a few shades faster'n it suits me."

"That's why yuh sent for me, fella. Folks needin' fast work allus send for Wade Steel. I—"

"I'm talkin' now!" snapped The Roost king. "When Jake Slade talks, I reckon most folks listen. If yuh had a grudge with Five Spot, you ought'a come to me. I knowed he was a double-crosser, like yuh say, but I ain't never hear'n 'bout him double-crossin' you—"

"Which is plum' natural that you didn't hear about it!" snapped Steel. "I keep my secrets to myself. Five Spot didn't know I knowed. Five Spot didn't think anybody knowed. But what's the use o' standin' here jawin' at each other? I'm dry. I wanta drink. Let's go down to the saloon. I reckon I can tell you somethin' about that dude on the floor that'll make your head swim."

"Come on, then!" snapped Slade. "We're plum' willin' to listen, but your yarn had better be mighty good. I sorter liked Five Spot Reed. Then there's another thought which hits me suddenlike, fella," the lids of his right eye narrowed. "There is such a thing as *yuh might not be Wade Steel!*"

Chapter VI

"I'll make that thing talk!"

WHAT a fool notion some men can get! Me might not be Wade Steel? Say, Rattlesnake, you get funnier every time I look at yuh. Maybe it's that eye. It seems so damn uppish, allus starin' at the high things. An' that nose looks like a wind-catcher on a steamboat."

They were back at the saloon now. Jake Slade was behind the bar. The newcomer to The Roost and the three other men were lined up against the bar.

"Look at them!"

Steel had dropped a half-dozen sheriff's bulletins on the bar. Each of the posters were reward notices, each poster carrying a picture of the wanted man. One glance at the pictures was enough. The pictures were unquestionably of the man at the bar.

"Fella, there ain't no question now," grinned Jake Slade. "I reckon yuh can't blame a man for bein' careful. That thought just came to me when I was lookin' at yuh up there in the doorway. I sorter allus doubt folks ontil I'm shore I know 'em. If yuh'd ever dropped in here before, there wouldn't 'a' been no question. Drink up, boys, it's on Jake!"

An hour later, the newcomer was further into the confidence of The Roost king. A grave had been ordered dug for Five Spot Reed. Fannydog had saddled the newcomer's horse, and, stirrup to stirrup like old friends, the newcomer and The Roost king were riding away together up the valley.

"I got somethin' to show yuh," explained Jake Slade. "It's been troublin' me a heap. I hear'n a year ago how yuh made a pair o' Texas Rangers talk down on the border. If yuh're that good, then yuh oughta be able to make what I have do as yuh say."

"The man ain't born what I can't handle, Rattlesnake," bragged the newcomer, taking a drink from a flask. "Some men are hard, some easy. You gotta figure each man, yuh see. But what's yore case all about? You might as well tell me. I'll find out, anyhow."

Slade hesitated, then gave a brief explanation. His companion chuckled.

"That's a heap o' money, Rattlesnake. I ain't had so much money since I stuck up the old Sante Fe. I'll make that thing talk! I'll get a split on that money along with it. Watch an' see 'f I don't."

"If yuh don't what?" grumbled Slade, watching him out of the corner of his eye.

"If I don't make 'im talk—and if I don't get a split o' that money."

"Yuh seem shore o' yourself, fella!" There was unbridling anger in The Roost king's tone.

"Which same is good for a man's indigestion, the kind what your panther milk whiskey gives a man. Bein' shore o' myself's what took me through a lota big deals, Rattlesnake."

"I told yuh I don't hanker for that name!"

"Uh-huh, but it fits so damn well, Rattlesnake. You remind me of a heap o' things I'd like to forget. Have a shot! It can't be no harder on you than me. Worst bellywash a human ever cooked. You musta made it outa polecat oil. Now where'd I put that stopper, Rattlesnake?"

"I've allus heard," growled Slade, "that Wade Steel had enough lip for nine men. Yuh shore ain't fallin' down on your rep', fella. 'Fore you an' me get through with each other, I reckon yuh're gonna learn that that name can get right up on its hind laigs an' bite a fella. Yuh're the most windy-headed duck I've ever looked at. A cyclone musta hit yuh at sometime an' blowed your brains out through your nose."

"That's a fact, Rattlesnake! That's a fact," grinned the newcomer, still searching for the cork to his flask. You'll never know how it feels for a man to be without 'em, 'cause yuh ain't never had nothin' inside that bullet head o' yo'rn except a little muddy water an' a chaw of tobacco floatin' 'round in it. Here's that damn stopper. Shoved it in my pocket accidental-like."

THEY were in the little valley with the run-down cabin a short time later. Slade led the way, urging his milky-white stallion into a gallop. In a few minutes, they were dismounting at the stump where the man in chains sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms.

"Brought company," grinned Slade, dropping reins and moving forward.

It seemed that the man on the stump had not looked up until that instant. His eyes semd to bulge forward in their swollen sockets. Lips trembling and hands rubbling jerkily, he stood up. Then he turned quickly and walked to the little spring. He took a sip of the water. He stood up, face deathly pale, then slumped into a huddled heap.

"What's the matter with the fool?" snarled Slade. "Damned if he didn't faint!"

"Scared stiff, I reckon!" The man behind Slade laughed harshly. "I know 'im. That duck knows me. He knows what he's up ag'in now. Splash some water on him 'fore I kick his face off just to try out my new boots!"

Ten minutes later, with the chained man recovered and propped against a stump, Wade Steel was standing in front of him. His oaths were furious, his fist shaking in front of the man's face to lay stress on his words.

"Yuh might think yo're hard, fella!" he snarled. "You know damn well I am. Yo're gonna talk. Me and Jake's gonna give you until midnight. Get me? When we come back here at midnight, you'll talk. I ain't the kind you can play with. I'm a duck what goes after his wants, Jim Bender."

A short time later, Steel and Slade were riding away. The bound man still sat leaning against the stump. His heart was pounding. A quick rush of tears fillled his eyes.

"It's a dream," he kept whispering. "A dream! But—but I'm awake! I—I swear I'm awake! It—it couldn't have been a dream. I—I might have known Dash would come. It *was* him! It *was!* It *was!*"

CHAPTER VII

"That Ain't Wade Steel!"

WHYN'T yuh speak up? Whyn't yuh tell Jake?" Three of Jake Slade's men were talking in the Roost saloon. Slade and Steel were still away.

"Dunno. Maybe my head was sorter muddled. Two drinks o' this junk on an empty stomach makes a man sorter offish under his hair. I ain't been feelin' well; ain't been eatin' much. Stummick botherin' me. A man can't have as much lead cut out'a his innards as I've had an' still feel as spry as a kitten, an' I reckon my brain sorter slows up o' late, 'specially atter I been out all night settin' behind a rock with a Winchester. But I'm shore now.

"Wade Steel's eyes are as black as yuhr damn hat. I saw 'im only once, but once was enough. Atter lookin' at a man once, I can allus tell yuh what kinda eyes he's packin' in his head, 'cause it's a man's eyes yuh allus watch. Yuh can tell your man by the way them eyes set in his head, by the way they slant, by how much skin hangs above 'em.

"Wade Steel's eyes was black. Not blue-black or any off shade. Plum black, an' they was hot eyes, the kind what seems to allus have somethin' burning' way back deep inside 'em. They never could look at yuh. They seemed to see yuh, know what yuh was doin' an' hearin' what yuh was thinkin'. At the same time, they was lookin' somewhere else, seein' everythin', hearin' everythin', yuh see? Right sharp eyes what didn't look sharp. Too dull an' hot. Took an expert to know they was sharp. I saw him once, down in Dago John's dump. Only once, but yuh can't forget some things. I didn't know who he was ontil he was gone. This bird here is cold-eyed—makes your skin crawl. Drink up."

Excitement was running high among the three lined up at the bar of The Roost saloon, and yet there was only a small outward show of it. The men spoke quietly, in low voices after the manner of men who knew the wisdom of keeping calm in any situation. They were drinking slowly, sipping their liquor. Fannydog stood behind the bar with her heavy hands resting on her huge, unshapely hips, and listened, keenly interested but allowing no sign of it to enter her stony expression.

"Then there's somethin' else," went on the man who had been speaking steadily. "Look at this thing." He picked up one of the reward notices that had been accidentally left behind when Jake Slade and his guest left the saloon for the trip to the run-down cabin. "There's somethin' 'bout the look o' that picture what don't jibe. 'Course a picture can be off shade on a man's looks. But somehow, I remember the way Wade Steel's head set on his neck. Walked like his neck was a little twisted, yuh see? But maybe that was only for the night I saw him."

"But it's the picture o' this dude what's here?" put in another man, sipping his drink slowly. "Anybody'd be able to tell that."

"Which ain't the point I'm gettin' at, damn it. I'm tryin' to say that this picture seems to tell me that this picture an' this dude what's here ain't the same Wade Steel I saw in Dago John's dump. This dude what's here is all right fer size, loose-jointed way o' walkin' an' loose way o' shootin' off his mouth like the whole world was made for him to talk at. But couldn't he be playin' a mighty fast racket?"

"An' where would his fast racket get 'im?"

"In hell quicker'n yuh can wink yuhr eye, Baldy Williams! An' in hell he's gonna go onless he can prove to me that a man can change the color of his eyes!"

FURTHER conversation was interrupted for the moment by a clatter of hoofs outside. A tall, gaunt-faced man of fifty wearing a sandy beard galloped up to the hitching-rack at the right of the door. He dismounted stiffly, pushed his old gray Stetson to the back of his head, and strolled inside. Two Dot Grant, the man who had been doing the bulk of the talking at the bar, turned to him eagerly.

"Here's Con Nalley, boys. He'll know, but keep your lip shut ontil he takes a look. Step up, Con." He folded the reward notice until only the picture was visible. "Who is this dude? Yuh've sashayed a heap along the Texas border. Maybe yuh'll know."

"What's the joke?" grumbled the newcomer suspiciously.

"There ain't no joke," the other assured him. "This picture might count for a lota things. Maybe your neck in a halter, for one thing. Look at it close an' see if yuh can name it."

There was silence for nearly a minute while lanky Con Nalley, horsethief, gunman, squawman from Texas, studied the picture.

"Yuh can't name it, huh?" demanded Two Dot Grant, impatiently.

"I can. On the other hand, somehow I can't. Looks plain as day, but it ain't. Where'd it come from?"

"Reward notice for Wade Steel, down on the border. If—"

"Wade Steel? Say, that ain't Wade Steel, yuh fool!"

"Yuh shore?"

"Shore, I'm shore! That ain't Wade Steel! Couldn't be. Somebody's only horsin' yuh. Why—why, I got it now. That's a picture o' Dash Bender, a brother to this man what Jake's holdin' up at the Ledbetter cabin. I'd know that rooster in Hell with his face burned off! How'd it get here."

"Yuh shore you know what your talkin' 'bout?"

"Shore, I'm shore! That's Dash Bender, Texas Ranger, gun-fightin'est thing on a pair o' feet what ever follered a hot trail."

"Then Dash Bender's here, Con!"

"If he's here, he's come for Jim Bender," the man answered excitedly, his liquor standing untouched in front of him. "I told Jake what to expect. Somehow, the word's got out. Where is he?"

"Up tuh the old Ledbetter cabin with Jake. Jake swallowed ever'thing he told 'im. This duck rides in this mornin', bringin' a letter Jake had writ to Steel. He got drunk here, went to sleep—an' killed Five Spot when he woke up. Five Spot went to see 'im, thinkin' it was Wade—"

"An' to keep Five Spot's mouth shut, Dash Bender bumped 'im! Yeah, I see. Dash Bender would do a trick like that. It'd be like 'im to blow in here an' make a fool outa Jake."

"But how'd he get his picture put on that notice?"

"Had 'em struck off at some printin' plant, yuh fool! That bird can do anything! He come here lookin' for Jim an' them fine race track broncs what Jake's been holdin' to get rich on. An' yuh see how he works. Blows in; makes a fish out'a Jake right off the hook—"

"Listen!" Hoofbeats were sounding, coming from northward. "Him an' Jake's a-comin' back. Get ready, yuh gunslingers. We want that dude!"

"Go easy," warned Con Nalley. "Plumb easy, but when I say the word, jab your guns in 'im clear to the handles —an' pull your triggers!"

Chapter VIII

LEAD LAW

STARK silence seemed to grip the big, dirt-floored room as the two men dismounted outside at one of the hitching-racks. Con Nalley stood at the head of the bar with his hat pulled low over his eyes and the six-shooters at his hips hitched forward. Two Dot Grant was at the store counter, leaning against it near the scales. Head down, eyes gazing at the floor, stubby hands folded across his stomach, it seemed that he was dozing. The other two men sat at the card table with their backs to the fireplace, their holstered six-shooters shoved forward until they were resting in their laps. Fannydog, as emotionless as a stone woman, loomed behind the bar, her round, cylinder-like forearms crossed, brown eyes listless.

"Outside an' take care o' your brats, Fannydog!" snapped Jake Slade as he came through the door with the newcomer to The Roost at his heels. "A pair o' the little devils fightin' like a couple o' tomcats up the creek a ways. See if yuh can't kick some sense into their heads an' put a stop to all that clawin' an' screechin'—Howdy, Con!"

"Howdy, Jake. Nice day."

Slade must have suspected something. His smoky right eye seemed to rake the room. As Fannydog moved out from behind the bar and disappeared through the door, he moved on and came to a halt behind the bar.

"Step up, Con," he grinned, smoky glances still moving from man to man. "I want yuh to meet Wade Steel. Steel, this is Con Nalley."

"Glad to meet yuh," grinned the old rustler, stepping forward and thrusting out his hand. "I been 'round your country quite a bit."

"Thasso? Fine country, Texas is."

"Uh-huh. So's Hossthief Pass, Montana, pard." Nally strolled back to the head of the bar. Little spots of paleness had flushed his cheeks. He cleared his throat with a hacking sound, raised a spurred heel to the foot-rail, and leaned his elbow on the bar. "Quick things happen in both places. I used to see a lot'a things go on down in that country. Been quite a spell since I been there, though. Rangers got sorter hot. Guess yuh've met 'em, huh?"

"Plenty times," grunted The Roost's newcomer. "Plenty. Have a drink? Ever'body?" he turned and looked at the others. "Belly up!"

There was a slight hesitation, one that seemed to attract the attention of Jake Slade. Then, at a signal from Con Nally, the men moved up to the bar. Men were now on either side of The Roost's newcomer.

"Set 'em out, Jake."

"I drinks to ever'body's health," exclaimed Nalley a few moments later, lifting his glass with his left hand, the right hand hanging on the bar-rail above the butt of a Colt that had been loosened in its holster. "To all folks north an' south; to them what has friends; to them what ain't; to men what ride long trails; to men what don't; to lyin' men an' sneakin' men; to men what think they're smart an' ain't; to good folks an' bad folks—an' even tuh a Texas Ranger!"

Jake Slade blinked a lack of understanding to each man's face.

"Fine!" exclaimed the man who called himself Steel. "Fill 'em up ag'in, Rattlesnake! I reckon that was a fine toast, but I reckon I can do it better."

"What's the meanin' of all this bunk about drinkin' to a Texas Ranger?" demanded Slade suspiciously. "The man don't walk what can stand up at my bar an' drink to the health of any sort o' law shark. If—"

"Fill the glasses an' shut up!" ordered Steel. "I reckon I got a toast I'd like to spill 'fore you start shootin' off a lota bazzoo."

"Shore!" growled Nalley, his lanky body set, muscles crawling beneath the skin. "I, for one, am waitin' to hear this squirt's toast, Jake."

"Then take it, damn you!"

IT WAS fighting time and dying time—for someone. The man, now known to be Dash Bender, not Wade Steel, had read the signs of danger the moment he entered the room. The introduction to Con Nalley had capped the climax. In the man's eyes, he had read instant recognition. Then had come the toast that was to shape the quarrel and bring a quick gun fight roaring to its peak. But Con Nalley had been a fool who had underestimated the quickness of the man he would down.

Going backward like a coiled spring unexpectedly expanding, Dash Bender had flung himself away from the bar as he spoke. By his quickness he gained an advantage that was scarcely a split-second-long, but in that split-second, in that sudden back flinging from the bar, Con Nalley died—died with a lightning-quick hand on the black butt of a half-drawn Colts and an unfinished oath on his opening lips, died from a bullet that gashed open his cheek to range upward and root out at the top of his graying head.

Snarls came from the other men. Nalley was down, slumping into a bundle, his hectic, crime-saturated life ending simultaneously with the roar of the big Colt that seemed to jar the room and start the air quivering.

Unable yet to understand what was really happening nor why it was happening, Jake Slade, a quick thinker in any man's row, dropped like a monstrous gopher jerking back into a hole, and disappeared behind the bar, his right hand flinging away his glass and whipping his six-shooter from its holster.

Another man hesitated, swore, ducked and weaved like a prize fighter avoiding an uppercut. Both his hands went flinging toward his holster. Bender was back against the heavy card table at this instant. He crouched, snarling like a wolf brought suddenly to bay. The table creaked, upsetting and filling the air with scattering poker chips and playing cards. His right hand whipped upward and downward. As it came upward, his thumb wrapped itself about the hammer of the weapon. As its muzzle fanned forward the hammer was drawn back. A relaxation of the thumb released it when the muzzle fanned to a line with its target. A roar, a tearing gash of flame licking forward with a splintering crash—and another man was down, gun-fanned out of existence!

Like startled sheep, Two Dot Grant and the other man at the lower end of the bar ducked. With half-spoken oaths they were gone, darting behind the bar to take shelter in rear of the hewn-log where Rattlesnake Slade crouched and waited with his old patience for an opportunity to strike.

Hesitation meant death. Dash Bender started side-stepping for the door. He sent two bullets crashing into the bottles and tobacco caddies on the back bar. A hand gripping a six-shooter thrust itself around the foot of the bar. Bender fired. The out-thrust sixshooter roared, its bullet ripping pine bark and splinters from the logs supporting the sod roof over Bender's head.

Bender fired again. This time his bullet drove true. It caught the wrist behind the out-thrust Colt. As if by magic, the bullet seemed to jerk the hidden owner of the six-shooter forward. For a fraction of a second, a Stetsoned head showed. That man died, too.

TWO DOT GRANT and Jake Slade were still left to deal with. Other men, Bender knew, would soon be pouring into The Roost. With Slade and Grant keeping down out of sight, his chance for escape lay in a quick dash to his horse and a quick getaway.

Bender seized the heavy door. With a quick jerk, he was outside and had closed the door behind him. A new

danger assailed him. A double-barreled shotgun charged with buckshot roared its double-thundering explosion at him from the front door of the main cabin across the creek. Fannydog—always one to be depended upon in a row at The Roost—had gone into action.

Buckshot rained like rattling hail against the front of the saloon. Horses snorted at the hitching-rack at the left of the door, showing that some of the shot had gone wild. A big bay reared and plunged over the rack. His reins held him, turned him in the air and brought him crashing down on the other side. With a snort, he was up, plunging backward. His reins snapped. He was gone with other horses lunging and trying to follow him on his wild dash southward.

Bender reached his horse. Like a man suddenly taking wings, he was in his saddle. A savage play of rowels sent his horse plunging over the hitching-rack. Again the shotgun belched from the doorway of the main cabin; again the air seemed alive with whistling shot.

A window at the north end of the store counter in the saloon now came to life. Six-shooters thundered. Bender's horse pitched suddenly. The shotgun across the creek double-roared again. Bender whirled, fired two quick shots at the saloon window, then flung himself clear of his saddle as his horse staggered and went down.

Hell was popping from two directions. The six-shooters blazed furiously from the saloon window. As regular as a clock's ticking, the old shotgun across the creek continued its roaring.

The law of lead was asserting itself. The air seemed alive with wild whistling. With his horse down, Bender started a dogged retreat toward a clump of chokeberry bushes along the rim of the creek. He reached the edge of them just as the shotgun spoke again.

Something slapped Bender. He staggered, hands and arms relaxing. His six-shooters slipped from his hands. Like a man suddenly stricken blind and helplessly drunk, his knees gave way. He slumped. In a daze he realized that he was on the ground hunched forward on his hands and knees. The shotgun roared again. A hail of buckshot tore the top out of a chokeberry bush just over Bender's head. He felt the falling brush come down on him like little drops of rain. A foolish grin crossed his face—and he know no more.

Chapter IX

THE STORM

SOMETHIN' tells me I'm lucky. Lady Luck must keep her eye on Jake Slade, mean as I'm supposed to be. An' right now I'm thinkin' she come to the front to help me outa a hole."

"Whatcha mean, Jake?"

"Well, I was sorter stuck with this Jim Bender," explained The Roost king, right hand resting on the bar as he faced the group of men who stood in front of him. "Was like a billy goat up a ledge with all jumpin' legs broke an' no way down, so to speak. Jim Bender wouldn't talk. Been just dyin' on our hands. Ever' day I had a notion to forget about his hid-out money an' just stick a bullet betwix his eyes. This Dash Bender, supposed to be right hard like cracked ice, blows in. I'm admittin' he pulled the hair over my eyes with his tall talk an' tall ways. Not that I was gonna let him get away with his yap atter I was through with him.

"But, anyhow, I swaller his hook, line an' sinker. He said he could make Jim Bender talk. Now he *is* gonna make him talk. One o' them buckshot only raked him 'longside o' the head. He'll be up an' spry in twenty-four hours. Then, gents, yuh'll see how Jake Slade can work a man."

"Uh-huh," put in Two Dot Grant, "but yuh gotta remember what I told yuh. We don't know who's apt to follow that bird in here. He had a map. He could 'a' drawed off other maps. Yuh know what I mean."

"Shore! On the other hand, we'll make him tell what he's done!" exclaimed Slade, striking the bar with the flat of his hand.

"An' what if he has? What if he's gonna have men follow him in here? What can we do to stand 'em off?"

"Stand 'em off! We know we've gotta make a stand-off fight in this place at some time. I ain't hankered for it, but we're in this mess. We gotta do the best we can. Anyhow, there'll allus be a way for us to back outa here if the worst comes to the worst. Havin' to do some things is like havin' to die. I ain't stuck on dyin', but I know my time'll

come. I'll fight ag'in it. So'll all o' yuh. But fightin' won't stop it. It'll come—an' we won't know nothin' 'bout it atter it's come. Drink up! Who was supposed to pay for that last round?"

Excitement had been high in The Roost. Just after the shooting, eight men, all heavily armed, attracted by the rolling sound of the firing had come galloping in from the other valleys. To be prepared for anything, Slade had issued rapid-fire orders that had sent four of the men galloping back to the valleys that led to cracklike canyons where men stood constant guard to give the alarm of any attempted entrance to the mountain stronghold.

"Watch ever'thing!" Slade had ordered. "We don't know what's apt to come next, but nobody ain't never caught Jake Slade asleep."

Five men now stood in front of the bar, drinking steadily. Slade was worried; yet he was too much of a leader to allow the men in front of him to know what was going on inside his cunning brain.

"If this dude what we've got in The Roost had anything fixed up on the outside, we'd know it. It'd have to come through Jumpin' Hoss, an' right there an' then Dago Pete would nip it in the bud. We'd know 'bout it 'fore it was many hours old, an—"

"Maybe yuh would, but yuh'd not get it from Pete!" interrupted a burly, black-bearded individual of forty who had just dismounted at the hitching-rack and had stepped into the doorway. "Dago Pete Cordoni's deader'n hell with the lights shot out!"

"Huh?" All eyes seemed to jump their stares upon the speaker.

"It's a fact!" declared the newcomer, moving up to the bar. "Gimme a drink, Jake. The Con Kid brought up the news to Windy Tupper in the south pass this mornin. Same fella what's here is the same fella what throwed lead into Dago Pete. They was playin' poker,' cordin' to Con Kid, an' Pete slipped a deck."

"I be shot!" grunted Slade after the newcomer had gone into a lengthy detail of the affair, reaching for the blacksnake whip lying on the back-bar. "I'm gonna see Dash Bender. If he's come back to his senses, I'm gonna pluck the eyes outa his head with this whip or make him talk. Take care o' the bar, Two Dot—an' don't try'n drink up all the whiskey in the place while I'm gone. Come on, boys!"

LIGHTS gleamed fitfully, queerly-winking, queerly-moving lights. A far off buzzing sound was going on. The air seemed hot and close. Stabs of pain seemed to come from every direction. Dash Bender opened his eyes, and found himself lying flat on a bunk in the cabin where he had killed a man earlier in the day.

After a time, he discovered that he was alone. He moved his left leg and heard something rattle. A weight at his ankle told him he was chained to the smelly bunk. He was about to sit up when a grumble of voices outside halted him. Relaxing, ears straining to every sound, he lay still. A few seconds later, grumbling at every step, Jake Slade unlocked the door and came banging into the room.

"Hey, you!" Slade's blacksnake whip hissed like a snake and cracked like a shot as it cut the air of the room. Its lash struck Bender on the hard surface of an automatic inside the bosom of his shirt. "Come outa it! I—"

"Wait, Jake!" interrupted a man behind him. "That ain't no way to bring him 'round. He's out, still knocked cold, as yuh can see. If yuh lash him up with that whip he'll only be that much harder to bring back to his senses. I'd say try a bucket o' water on 'im."

Water was tried, but it was useless. Bucketful after bucketful from the little creek outside was spilled on the prone man, but not a muscle moved in the relaxed face, body and limbs.

"It's no use," grumbled an old horse-thief near the door. "Pilin' all that water on 'im won't help us none a-tall. We just gotta wait, Jake. A bullet will sometimes pile a man up for days at a spell—"

"But that was only a buckshot!"

"An' a buckshot's a bullet. He mayn't be hurt to any amount, but his senses are knocked plum' cold. Jumpin' on him now ain't gonna do us no good. Take him easy; handle him like a baby until he comes 'round in his head."

Slade reluctantly stamped out of the room a few minutes later. Once more Dash Bender was alone. He lay there trying to think, conscious of little more than the fact that the right side of his head was matted with blood and paining him fiercely.

From all appearances, his careful plan for the rescue of his brother had come to a sudden end. It had been by almost an accident that he had come into possession of the letter and maps that had given him a passport to enter the horsethief stronghold. But the original Wade Steel would never pack another letter and a map in his pocket, for Wade Steel was dead—dead and buried in the sand of a waterless arroyo a mile east of the Rio Grande; buried in the very arroyo where he had made a stand-off fight with the man who had taken his letter, map, and name.

"I'm borrowing your name," had sneered Dash Bender as he stood over the man. "I'll be Wade Steel until my job is done; then I'll postcard that name back to you if Uncle Sam can furnish me with your address in hell."

THERE had not been a moment of time wasted. Bender had ridden straight to old Captain Jim Black, chief of the Rangers along the river, and requested a leave of absence.

"Which I ain't in no shape to give yuh," had grumbled the grizzled Ranger. "But I know how yuh feel. That letter doesn't say Jim Bender is in the clutches of that devil up there in Montana, but I reckon it hints enough. Nobody would send all the way down here for Wade Steel just to have him brand a bunch of ordinary horses. Jim Bender was seen going into the badlands north of that Horsethief Pass country. He had ten or twelve of the finest race stock a man ever owned in one string. He had money along with him. If Jake Slade found out he was comin'—well, Jim Bender fell in Slade's hands. An' sometimes I wish I had that Slade in my country. I've heard so much about him I'd like to try my hand ag'in him.

"But you wait a couple o' days," the old Ranger had grumbled on. "I know the sheriff in Jumping Horse. Let me get a letter through to him. His name's Handcock, Long Tom Handcock. If he can help yuh, he'll do it. I'll have a map drawn. From what I know of Tom, he'll appreciate that map. An' when yuh get to Jumping Horse, just manage some way of lettin' Tom know 'Wade Steel' is passin' through. Don't go boltin' right into his office, 'cause they tell me that town's full o' Horsethief Pass spies. Word would go to Slade right after yuh was seen talkin' to Tom. So use yore head an' both guns—an' maybe, son, yuh'll come back to the grand old Lone Star State o' Texas alive! But when yuh get inside the pass, what if somebody recognizes yuh? What'll yuh do then?"

That question was now being settled. What would be its answer? A rumble of distant thunder that appeared to ride the cliffs and peaks to southward like a monstrous army of noisily rolling wagons seemed to grumble a threatening answer to the question. Dash Bender was about to move his head and look out the crack between the cabin logs at the head of the bunk, but fearing that he might be watched kept him still.

A yellow darkness from the clouds seemed to settle like folding wings outside. A sudden wind whipped through the cottonwoods, lashing their limbs furiously. Again the thunder wagons rolled threateningly around the cliff tops. Suddenly the darkness was split by a zig-zagging blade of lightning. Doors down the street slammed. It seemed but an instant later that lightning struck a big cottonwood across from the saloon and The Roost shook from end to end.

Sheets of rain followed, coming down suddenly and with a slithery sound. It seemed but a moment before a fierce downpour was whipping the cabin. Lightning again whipped a red-hot, zig-zagging ribbon of crackling menace across the valley.

Bender cautiously rolled over on his stomach. Lifting his head to the crack in the logs he looked down the street toward the saloon. If ever there was to be an opportunity for escape, it would be now. The storm had become a wind-lashing roar, the fast-flying sheets of rain almost blotting out the other buildings. Once Bender caught a glimpse of the saloon door as the rain sheets appeared to divide for an instant. He saw that the door was closed to keep out the fierce blasts of the rain and wind beating directly against it.

HEAD swimming, stomach feeling upset, Bender turned around on the bunk and examined the chain around his ankle. It was fastened with a padlock much like the ones he had seen on his brother's ankle and wrists in the valley to northward. He examined it closely, then grinned, for

Dash Bender was a man of preparedness; all men were who rode for Captain Jim Black down on the Texas border.

"Always have a little quick-cuttin' file on yuh," the old man had told him. "Yuh never know when such things come handy. Plant it next to the skin where it'll be hard to find, an' keep it there. Nothin' helps a man so much when he's caught in a jack-pot, an yo're apt to be caught in one up there in Horsethief Pass. Keep them automatics planted close, too. Yuh never know when you'll be able to use an extra pair o' gats."

Bender had the file. It was strapped in a thin case to the inner side of his left leg. In a moment he had it out. In a minute more a link of the chain had been cut through with short, rapid strokes. He stood up, swaying dizzily. The door was yet to be encounted, and it was the only way out, for the cabin windows were mere cracks in the logs no wider than a man's hand. He reached the door. It was fastened with a chain. In a short space of time he had filed a link from the door chain.

It looked like an easy getaway. The rain sheets were still blotting out the buildings down the street, the storm still howling furiously. Bender started to move out the door, but the figure of a man in a baggy raincoat who had been standing guard under a wide overhang of the roof logs suddenly lurched in front of him.

"Back up, fella!" snarled the man, jabbing the muzzle of a six-shooter in Bender's stomach. "Yuh must think we're mighty damn slow round these parts. Back up or I'll gut-shoot yuh. Jake had an idea yuh was playin' dead puppy on 'im. Back up!"

Chapter X

FIST AND SKULL

SURPRISED, caught redhanded, the muzzle of the guard's six-shooter hard-pressed in the pit of his stomach, Bender backed away slowly from the door, while the burly guard followed him closely with a sneer on his dark-bearded face and thick, twisted lips.

Bender knew a fighting face when he looked at it. The one in front of him was a heavy and bulldoggish visage. The eyes were small and brown, close-set eyes that carried both belligerence and cunning. The jaws were massive, their muscles big lumps on either side of the face; the nose was short and bulby, its stumpy point uptilted. Broad-shouldered, deep-chested, arms long and thick, the backs of his hands covered with hair, it was a virtual gorilla that Jake Slade had left to guard his prisoner.

"We ain't noways as dumb as yuh think!" The man hissed the words through his thick lips, his beads of eyes glowing as though warmed by red flames in their depths. "Back up! We gotta lota things to talk with yuh about. I reckon yo're gonna talk without any o' this ruction stuff from now on."

Bender glanced down at the hand holding the six-shooter. The pearl-handled weapon was a single-action Frontier Colt. For a second the man's thumb rested behind the hammer instead of being hooked upon it. That meant that it would take an instant for that thumb to rise and whip itself over the hammer. In that instant would be an opportunity for a man to live or die. Without waiting to think about it, Bender brought down his left hand like a flash, his hard-knotted fist striking the guard on the right forearm.

The six-shooter jerked away from Bender's stomach. A quick snarl came from the guard, but it was cut short by a quicker right fist that slammed hard against the man's bearded jaw to stagger him back for a pace. Then Dash was after him. He struck the guard's right wrist another downward blow as the man's hand was coming up, and the six-shooter dropped with a dull *thump* on the floor.

"Damn yuh! Yuh think—"

THE words were cut short by a solid blow that landed flatly across the man's mouth, staggering him back another pace. Bender was right after him, whipping up a left-hook to the body. The man weaved away now, doggedly trying to get his left hand under his raincoat where another six-shooter hung strapped to his leg from a pair of criss-crossed cartridge-belts. But the wet raincoat was cumbersome, and again Bender was quicker.

He brought up a swift blow that landed deep in the pit of the man's roundish stomach. There was a grunt, a sputtered oath. The man lurched forward, body bending at the middle like a clos-

ing jack-knife. Dash ripped his face with a hard right and a hard left. He missed with a second right, then tried to fling himself back, but he was too late.

Ape-fashion, the man's long arms flying outward and seizing him, Bender found himself suddenly in a gorilla-strong grip. He struck at the scowling face hard-pressed against his chest. The guard accepted the blow with a whisperlike oath. It was not with his fists that he was trying to fight. Dash knew that the man realized that his advantage lay in the powerful grip of his arms, and the man was using them, slowly hugging Bender's waist like a monster python's tightening coil.

With his breath being squeezed out of him, the stubby chin pressing like the heel of an anvil against his chest to assist in bending him backward, Bender struck rights and lefts. The guard continued to accept the blows with puffy, little grunts. A quick pain started growing through Dash's body and racing toward his head, legs and arms. He felt suddenly dizzy. A wild thought came to him that he was fighting a monster thing instead of a man. In desperation, his hands tore at the scowling face against his chest, his fingers scratching into it like claws.

An oath came from the guard. Bender's had struck him in the eye. For an instant the powerful arms relaxed. Lost to all sense of everything but the mad necessity of breaking away, Dash struck at the man's face again. A snarl of pain and a quick oath blubbered up from his chest. The great arms loosened, slacked. Dash ripped the man a hard right, opening his cheek to the bone.

Suddenly they were separated and standing a yard apart. Outside the wind was still whipping the cottonwoods and whirling the chokeberry bushes along the creek. Driving sheets of rain were continuing to pelt the cabin, the wind-whipped water beating against the logs of the little building in flying clouds. Lightning crashed somewhere, throwing a yellow glow over the world. Thunder rolled its mighty wagons along the cliff tops.

DASH was thankful for all that noise. Secretly, he was thankful that his guard had made no outcry to bring men rushing to the cabin from the saloon. And now his antagonist was standing there, head down, hands flung out on either side of him, the fingers spread like ready-to-seize claws, the beady eyes glittering like adder eyes in sunlight, the powerful chin thrust forward, lips quivered and working, a streak of blood finding its way down his left cheek from a torn brow. With an oath, the man started throwing himself backward, his left hand moving frantically to find its way beneath the flappy raincoat to the butt of a long Colt.

With a leap, Dash was after him. The man ducked a right to the jaw, but failed to jerk his head out of the reach of a short, jarring uppercut that landed hard against the point of his chin. He grunted an oath, left hand still clawing at his raincoat. Bender kicked out viciously with all his strength. The heel of his boot caught the man on the wrist. A bellow of pain filled the cabin.

Startled by the outcry, afraid it would reach ears down the street, Dash desperately aimed an uppercut to the jaw. The burly guard avoided it, and sent a hurried return kick to Bender's stomach. Bender caught the foot as it landed. He jerked upward, gripping the man's ankle firmly. In a flash the guard was off his feet. He yelled again, but as he yelled lightning and thunder drowned his voice.

"Yell again and I'll tear your damned head off," snarled Dash.

The man had wrenched free. Like a giant bullfrog, he was jerking his legs under him to leap away. Here was an opportunity to settle the fight. Dash stepped in close. He sent a brutal right fling to the man's jaw. The blow hurled him against the stout leg of the dirty bunk in the rear corner of the room.

"My life or yours!" hissed Dash. "I'm not here to take a fool's chance to let you back to your feet where you can bellow for help again."

But the fight was far from finished. The guard came to his feet with surprising quickness. Dash rushed him. He landed a right and left to the bull-dog jaw. He stabbed the brute face with one blow after another. Snarling, spitting blood and a pair of front teeth, the man weaved in, little eyes two burning dots in a bleeding face. He kicked furiously, striking out rights and lefts. Suddenly Dash was down, down on his back with the ape-man flinging atop him.

"Now we'll see, damn yuh!" the man snarled, sneezing blood, his mouth a red-dripping crack. "I'm gonna gouge your eyes outa your head."

"I'll be here when you do!"

IT WAS an old-fashioned "fist and skull" affair. With his man down, the guard's stubby fingers flew to the upturned face. Dash jerked his feet upward like a juggler lying on his back to spin a barrel. His heels dug into the stout ribs. With a kick, he sent the guard flying to land with a grunt against the wall.

Lightning crashed and the thunder rolled along the cliffs as Dash jerked to his feet. By a scant two inches, he avoided a bull-like rush. The guard whirled and came rushing back. Dash side-stepped, throwing out a right foot. The guard tripped. He came down with a grunt, landing face down against the heavy planks. Like a leopard, Dash was upon his back.

But there was no holding the burly man. He came up like a grizzly shaking a weight from his back. They clenched. Shirts gave way across the shoulders, the cloth ripping as though claw strokes had torn it. Blows landed, rights and lefts. For a minute the men grimly faced each other and stood toe to toe, neither giving ground. A smashing uppercut hurled Dash against the wall. The guard rushed. Dash thrust out his foot. The guard ran into it. He went flinging back with a low grunt. Shaking his head, mouth running blood, he came in again. Dash drove a fierce right hook to his jaw and snapped his head back with an uppercut. The man went down, his heels flying up. His heels came down with a crash, driving the big rowels of his spurs deep into the floor.

Weaving, left eye closed, the other in the process of swelling, corners of his mouth dripping streaks of red, Dash staggered over the down man. A coil of rope hanging on a rusty nail near the door caught his eye. He shuffled rather than walked to it. He took the rope down and returned to the unconscious man, dropping to his knees beside him. In a few minutes he had the guard bound and gagged. He removed the two cartridge-belts and the six-shooter from the man's body, strapping the belts around his own waist, then he walked over near the door, picked up the other six-shooter, shoved it into his holster, and was ready to make another attempt to escape.

Rain was still pouring outside, although the sky seemed to be clearing gradually. He looked down the street. The door of the saloon was still closed, the rain still beating against it. Bender whirled back to the guard and removed his raincoat. He picked up the man's hat, slipped it on and pulled the raincoat about his shoulders.

Shielded by the flying sheets of rain, he was outside a moment later. Moving quickly, he reached the chokeberry bushes along the little creek. Stepping inside of them, he started wading in the muddy water, going toward the hitching-racks in front of the saloon.

With the rain still guarding him, Bender reached the hitching-racks. Moving in among the horses, he started removing the animals' bridles. He reserved two of the animals, both long-legged bays with Winchester carbines hanging in their saddle-boots and belts of cartridges strapped around their necks.

It looked as though everything would be a get-away without a hitch. All the horses were loose except the two he wanted to use. And now the loose horses were turning away. Bender was in the act of mounting one of the bays when the door of the main cabin across the creek opened. Fannydog, peering through the rain, stood in the opening, The woman screeched, and Dash Bender knew he had been discovered.

Chapter XI

WHISPERING BULLETS

HOWLING sounds came from the inside of the saloon. With a leap, Dash Bender was in the saddle of one of the long-legged bays. He yelled, spurred the horse, and whirled him. The horse he was to lead hesitated, then followed. The rest of the horses went scampering away from the racks. A double-barreled shotgun double-roared in the mêlée. The saloon door banged open, and from the saloon came a yelling group of men. A six-shooter exploded, its bullet cutting the air close to Bender's head; then he was gone, the flying sheets of rain—still coming from a cloudburst—covering him.

Bawled out orders filled the air behind him. Thunder drummed beyond

the cliffs. Spurring steadily, Bender kept up his wild dash to northward. All depended now on his getting into the little valley where his brother was chained. Once in there, the shackles would soon be cut away; then would come another wild dash to get out of the little valley and into a larger one where a better opportunity would be had to make a stand-off fight.

Absolute escape from Horsethief Pass would be, Bender knew, almost an impossibility unless outside help came to him. In talking with Slade, he had learned that there were three other outlets and inlets to the mountain stronghold other than the one he had traveled to play his ruse. Without knowing where those other outlets were, one would be lost. In addition, there would be the guards to reckon with; men hidden in rocks with Winchesters to down any men leaving or entering the stronghold who were not supposed to enter or leave it. Those men would be constantly alert now, and the only hope of escape lay in the coming of Sheriff Tom Handcock and a party of hard-riding, hard-fighting men from Jumping Horse.

Would Sheriff Handcock be able to find the way by the rough map Old Captain Jim Black had sent him? And what if Captain Jim's letter had gone astray? It struck Dash as he raced along that he had placed oceans of confidence in that letter reaching Tom Handcock. It had been years since Jim Black had been with the man. What if Tom Handcock had strayed from the pathway of honest dealings and become a tool of Rattlesnake Jake Slade's?

"A devil of a lot of confidence to be placed in Tom Handcock, a man I didn't know," grumbled Dash as he bobbed along in the rain, his horse splattering mud and water under flying hoofs. "At that, I could always trust old Jim. He wouldn't be the kind—still, even Jim Black has made mistakes."

With their horses gone, scared away from the hitching-racks, it would be some little time before Rattlesnake Slade and his men would be able to follow. And every minute of Slade's delay would count.

Slopping on through the mud and water, Dash was soon in the crooked passage leading out of The Roost valley. He entered the smaller valley, crossed it, and entered the mouth of the second passage. He pulled to a slow canter now, watching closely for the brush-covered crevice mouth. He came to it finally, and turned inside it. A short gallop brought him up in front of the run-down cabin. The chain running from the stump and disappearing under the down door told him Jim was inside. As he was dismounting, the door was flung open, and Jim Bender stepped into the square.

THERE was only time for a few words. Working like a madman with his file, Dash cut the chains that handcuffed his brother's wrists together. Then he dropped to his knees and started work on a link of the chain around Jim's ankle. After a minute of rapid cutting with the file, it parted with a dull *clink*. Dash leaped to his feet.

"We'll talk later, Jim," he exclaimed. "They've got me on the run. We'll have to get out of here in a hurry."

"There's a valley with a cabin in the middle of it north of here," Jim explained, his voice trembling as he mounted the horse that had been brought along for him. "They had me there for a time."

The rain was letting up abruptly now. Spurring into a fast run, the two men swung their horses toward the mouth of the crevice that was to lead them back into the outer passage. They reached it, plunged inside, then slowed their horses as they neared the larger passageway.

No sign of anyone lurking in the passage showed to the right nor left. Panicky with the relief of his sudden freedom, virtually a dead man lifted from a grave and brought back to life, Jim Bender led the way. At the end of a ten minute gallop, the passageway widened. They reached a valley three-quarters of a mile long and a half-mile wide with a small, sod-roofed log cabin standing in its center surrounded by a grove of cottonwoods.

Cliffs and ledges reared against the sullen sky on either side of the valley and appeared to come together to northward like the inside planking of a boat's bow. The valley floor was level until it reached a little benchland two hundred yards beyond the cabin. There it started a gradual slope upward that seemed to come to an end in a slippery rock slide at the head of the valley. At the foot of this rock slide, almost hidden in a

growth of pine saplings, stood a small band of horses. Jim Bender studied them eagerly.

"Not mine!" he exclaimed, thinking aloud. "Must have them cached in some valley not so hard to get into. But we'll have to watch now, Dash. Somebody might be in that cabin. Look! There's smoke ahead!"

The smoke was coming from beyond the place where the rock slide came to an end like the sharp point of a wedge. It was just a faint streak of blue, and yet it was an ominous warning that some one was hiding up there on the ledge.

"Must be one of the outlets of this hellish hole!" Dash Bender spoke in the spasmodic voice of a man who had laboured until he was out of breath. "The guard must have got cold up there from all this rain."

THEY were riding up to the cabin a short time later. Approaching it from the front, they saw that the door was fastened by a buckskin thong wrapped around a rusty nail. Dismounting in front, Dash went inside while his brother stayed in his saddle to watch. Dash returned to the doorway with an extra pair of Winchester rifles and two belts of cartridges.

"It's a regular arsenal, Jim," he explained. "Plenty of guns, plenty of cartridges, and the place is chuck-full of grub. What do we do? Try to go on? Or do we stop here and do our damndest to make a stand-off scrap?"

The question was answered, but it was not answered by Jim Bender. A low buzzing sound cut the air overhead. From the direction of the smoke streak beyond the rock slide came the faint report of a high-powered rifle.

Another bullet whispered a few seconds later, cutting the air dangerously close. It passed on, *clicked* against a rusty horseshoe nailed to one of the cottonwoods, and flung on to lose itself in a little thicket of buck brush seventy yards south of the cabin.

"That settles it!" cried Dash. "Get down, Jim, and let the horses go. We can at least make them think we've holed up in here. Night will be coming down on us soon, then we can make a shift. In the meantime, we know where to find an outlet if we can knock over that guard up there beyond that slide. Hurry!"

Another bullet from the rock slide came flying through the trees. It struck nothing, merely passed through the trees and lost itself in the air.

"At least," grumbled Dash, as he went hurrying back into the cabin, "the passing of that lead tells us that Slade had instructed every man in the valleys to be on the lookout for us in case we should attempt to escape."

Another bullet slapped the cabin's overhang of roof. It glanced, struck a cottonwood, bounded from it and went whining away in the damp air.

CHAPTER XII

"We got 'em!"

WHATZMATTER with all us damn fools! Here's this place turned into a morgue 'fore a cat can lick it's whiskers! Dead men scattered all 'round, an' Ben Ford, that knock-kneed jackass, tied up like a yearlin' ready for the brandin' iron. We've been actin' just like a bunch o' hound pups stumblin' into a yaller-jackets nest. An' now this dude what we tuck all the trouble to chain up so damn nice is gone to—"

"But he can't get outa here, Jake. He'll only head north, like he was headin', an' he'll run into Chip Tanner soon as he hits the big slide. There an' then, like a jackrabbit runnin' face-on into one o' you hounds, he'll stop. Caught agin."

"Yeah, 'caught agin!' I ain't skeered o' 'im gettin' out'a here. He can't, but atter we get him, how long'll we keep him? I gota big notion just to gun-blast somebody else 'round The Roost just to see 'em cave in at the middle. Where's them fools what went to catch them broncs. If it hadn't been for Fannydog, Bender mighta been gone for hours 'fore we knowed it. Get out an' help with them broncs! Don't stand there an' look at me with your jaw hangin' down like a strap-hinge. There's work to do."

Two Dot Grant reluctantly shuffled away from the door of the saloon. All the rain had let up, but the sky was still sullen and threatening. Where the clouds had settled a yellowish darkness over the valley a short while before, the darkness of night was now gathering around the mouths of pockets in the cliffs to eastward.

Slade stamped the dirt floor angrily as he whirled and moved back behind

his bar. He poured himself a drink, downed it, followed it with another, and moved over to the store counter to put on his blanket-lined rainslicker.

He stamped back to the saloon door and stood there leaning against the rough jamb, watching the efforts of the men east of the cabins who were trying to capture loose horses. Fannydog joined him a short time later.

"If it wasn't for yuh," grumbled Slade, absent-mindedly, "this whole place would haywire." Then, warmly, "I didn't add the 'dog' to the end o' your name for nothin'. Yo're like a dog, woman. Got all the faith of a dog—a good un. I ain't meanin' hounds like our brats play with. An' if my men was like yuh, we wouldn't have no trouble in this place. Yuh do your work without yappin' a lota loose lip about it. The others talk long an' loud—an' they're like a bronc with a burr under his saddle when it comes time for action. I'm sick o' this whole mess. Gonna pull my stakes one o' these days an' get outa this country. Gonna hit Mexico or Canada. We can't last in this place the way things are goin'."

"Go back my people, uh?" grunted the woman, her face emotionless, dull eyes watching the work of the men eastward.

"No, not back to your people!" snapped Slade. "I said Mexico or Canada. How long would we last with your fool folks? Wouldn't be no time until a bunch o' law sharks showed up to start a lota trouble. An' anyhow, I ain't hankerin' for no Indian village stuff. We got money—plenty o' money. I figured on shovin' out after I'd pulled Jim Bender over the coals. Figured on shovin' off somewhere an' settlin' down. Had a notion we'd go to some big town. I'm tired o' workin'. Won't have to work after I'm out'a here. Which'll be damn soon, 'cause I see the handwritin' on the wall. This place is goin' up in smoke!

"But I ain't lettin' the others know," he grumbled on. "It'll be ever' man for 'imself. I've used 'em, got 'em killed off—an' killed 'em off, myself. Some men are made to be used, then killed. If I didn't do it, somebody else would come along an' use 'em—an' kill 'em. So we'll blow outa here soon. Just ease out with a couple o' pack broncs—an' let ever'thing go to the devil. If I ever leave a place, I never go back. Generally can't."

Oct. 2-29

HE STAMPED off across the creek. Two of the men had caught one of the loose horses. The others would soon be rounded up. Slade walked on to the big corral in rear of the main cabin. There he halted, leaning against a pole. He glanced back at Fannydog. The woman was still leaning in the doorway. Slade's big lips twisted into a grin.

"Yeah, I'll soon be through with The Roost," he whispered to himself. "Through with The Roost an' all what's in it; you along with it, Fannydog. I ain't aimin' to go draggin' into no town with a flat-faced squaw an' a bunch o' brats trailin' my heels.'

Horses were soon being hazed up to the corral. Slade opened the wide gate of the haystack corral and stood back a short distance to flap his slicker and wave his arms to aid in turning the loose animals into the enclosure.

"Biggest bunch o' dumb clucks I've ever laid eyes on," he grumbled at the horses as one of the animals broke away. "Just like the men tryin' to haze 'em. Got about enough sense to pound sand in a gopher hole. Slow at this an' slow at that. Whiskey only makes their thick heads hurt. I'm sorter glad Dash Bender eased in here to start all this ruction. It'll force me out, make me do the thing I been plannin' to do for the past two years— Head that bronc, yuh fool!"

The work progressed slowly. Slade cursed in spasmodic spells. Once he actually grinned, but there was no sign of a grin on his face when the horses were captured and he set off riding in the lead of three men and pushed his milky-white stallion into a gallop.

"By now," he grumbled to Two Dot Grant, "he's done been in the little valley an' got Jim Bender loose. He had a file on him somewhere, an' we was fools enough not to search him good. Hereafter, maybe that'll be a lesson to yuh. Just slippin' a pair o' six-shooters out'a somebody's holsters ain't no sign that he mightn't have somethin' else on him what needs takin'."

They came to the brushed-over crevice that led into the craterlike valley where Jim Bender had been kept a prisoner. Slade sent Two Dot Grant into the place. In a short time, Grant was back.

"Gone, of course!" the man reported.

"Chains filed. No hosses hangin' round. Means they've gone on. We'd better watch ourselves."

A distant report of a rifle came to their ears. The men looked at each other. Two Dot Grant grinned.

"Didn't I tell yuh, Jake?" he exclaimed broadly. "Chip Tanner's bottled 'em up!"

DARKNESS was settling rapidly when they reached the valley with the cabin among the cottonwoods. Slade sent a man galloping off behind a fringe of buck brush to carry a message to the guard beyond the rock slide.

"An' tell him to cut that shootin'!" ordered Slade. "He can't hit nothin'. Them dudes are in that cabin. Any fool can see that, 'cause I can see that there's a pair o' hosses down there.

"Yuh, Simms," he whirled to another man, "ride back to The Roost. Yuh'll find a case o' dynamite under the store counter. Most a case, anyhow. Get—oh, ten sticks. Get caps an' fuse. Fanny-dog'll fix yuh up. An' bring plenty o' matches an' a handful o' seegars. Fetch up a couple o' other men with yuh. I'm gonna start a right nice war in damn short order."

"What yuh gonna do with the dynamite, Jake?"

"Use it!" grunted The Roost king. "Do yuh think I helped build railroads without learnin' somethin'? We can't get them dudes outa that cabin by just shootin' into it. Logs are thick enough to stop most any bullet. But a stick o' dynamite—

"We've got 'em," he went on. "We've got 'em! There's a wash about fifty yards west o' that cabin. We'll slide up, an' from there we'll throw that dynamite. A lighted seegar stuck to a match head poked into the end of a short fuse will start our work sizzlin'. A quick throw—an' things starts poppin' in short order."

"Uh-huh," muttered Grant, "but when yuh do, yuh kill Jim Bender along with his brother."

"Which is just what I expect to do, yuh fool!"

"So I'm beginnin' to understand, dumb as yuh so often say I am," grumbled Grant, pulling at his lower lip. "But what about that twenty thousand? We boys were to get a cut outa that."

"That twenty thousand," Slade whirled in his white stallion's saddle, face scowling, "is done. I've give it up. These dudes have gotta be put outa the way, if yuh ain't forgot that letter an' that map—an' Dago Pete Cordoni bein' killed in Jumpin' Hoss. I'm through takin' chances. Go get that dynamite! Don't set there with mouth open!"

Chapter XIII

HELL POPS

SO THEY brought me here. I was knocked cold by a bullet, you see, and couldn't remember being brought in. My first knowledge of what had happened after the fight at the waterhole was when I opened my eyes and saw Jake Slade standing over me while another man squatted at my left pouring a bucket of cold water on my chest. I have an idea that I had been blindfolded to keep me from seeing anything in case I regained consciousness on my way into the valley. They kept me here overnight, then moved me into The Roost."

Jim Bender talked in a whisper as he lay flat on the floor beside his brother. Oily darkness had settled outside. The rifle firing from the rock slide had ceased, leaving everything lone and still. The two men had been whispering for more than an hour. Twice Jim Bender, spirit broken by torture and enforced starvation, had broken down, weeping like a heart-broken school boy.

"I know I'm acting like a weak-kneed fool," he had sobbed as Dash lay with his arms around him, "but—but I've been through enough to make a man weak, Dash. All that time I had one thought in mind. I believed you would come. Something seemed to tell me that you would find out—somehow. There were times when I prayed that you wouldn't find out, that you wouldn't come, because I was afraid of the things they would do to you.

"When I saw you ride up to that stump with Jake Slade—well, I'll always pride myself that I had sense enough to keep from exposing you on the spot. Maybe I would have exposed you if I hadn't fainted. At any rate, you played your part. I did the best I could with mine, but it was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life."

"Quit thinking about it," ordered Dash. "Don't think of anything you've been through. We're not out of this yet —not by a long ways. We may never get out. My plans for coming in here seem to have been muddled. I know I made them complicated, but Jim Black wanted to help me; and you know how mysterious old Jim can be. He always works a job from about forty different angles. If that Tom Handcock is on the level, we'll get help. If he isn't on the level, he'll be against us.

"But I've been in tighter holes than this, Jim," he went on. "The devil always seems to be close around to take care of his own. And we'll give them one of the damndest runs for their money they've ever had. We won't lose hope. Never! A man wins when he's in a jam only by slinging lead faster than the other fellow and at the same time keeping his head cool.

"They won't try to come in on us. That's a certainty; no man is going to walk up to a dark building and shove the door open on men he knows will shoot him down without giving him a chance in the world to fight; and they won't try to burn us out. There's too much clearing outside for anything like that, because they couldn't get up close enough. They might try throwing something from that wash west of us, but that'll be a hard job—as far as throwing fire is concerned.

"Then what will they do?"

"The devil only knows. Maybe they'll try starving us out for the want of water. We haven't any water, and they must know it; and there's no chance for our getting out to that spring below here. If they think they have plenty of time, they'll sit down and wait. If they think they must hurry—well, I don't know what they'll do, because I don't know what I would do if I were on the outside and they were in here with me trying to get them out.

"Not that I mean we're going to try to stay here indefinitely. We'll have to make a change, somehow. From the looks of the cliffs all around us, it'll be impossible to scale them. It couldn't be done between darkness and daylight, and when daylight came, there we would be, handsome targets for a fair marksman to pick off the rocks like shooting a goat from a ledge. Our hope lies in reaching the top of the rock slide when we start. There's brush up there. Must be, and we could get cover in it.

"To go southward would only run us into more trouble. We'd have to pass The Roost. Besides, Slade'll keep a guard on the pass leading into this valley from the direction of The Roost. We're in a jug that has a hole at each end, and both the holes are plugged."

THUNDER suddenly rolled threateningly along the cliffs. A gash of lightning ripped the darkness. It struck somewhere back among the peaks with the crash of artillery. Wind stirred the cottonwoods, whipping the heavy limbs until they roared like an angry sea. Big rain drops pattered weirdly on a pile of tin cans at the edge of the yard at the west side of the cabin. The pattering lasted for just a few moments, then it was gone. Another streak of lightning, a sizzling, zig-sagging ribbon of red-hot fire, opened its tearing pathway in the sky. Again the thunder rumbled along the cliffs.

Suddenly a rifle crashed eastward of the cabin. It's bullet ripped out a foot-long splinter in the heavy door, whined across the room and thudded itself into the wall. Another shot sounded close after it. Another bullet struck the door. It ripped out a smaller splinter, struck a knot in one of the cottonwood logs, glanced, ranged upward against the roof logs, kicking down a fine shower of dirt that sprinkled the two men lying flat on the floor.

"A little way," whispered Dash Bender, "of telling us that they are still on the job. We'd better keep out of line of the door. You slide over to the west side of the room. I'll take the east side. There might be a chance of our getting in a lucky shot. Listen!"

Quick shots sounded north and south, sending bullets beating into each end of the cabin while the shooting from eastward increased. No sound of firing had yet come from the west.

"Watch that side close, Jim," whispered Dash. "There's something stirring. They're trying to attract all attention to the ends of the cabin and to eastward. Keep your eye on that wash. If they're going to try to pull something, it'll soon be coming from that direction."

Jim Bender's Winchester cracked like an exploding firecracker a few seconds later. A yell answered him, coming from

the wash. A man swaggered to his feet, hands gripping at his throat. Lightning flashed at that instant. Jim fired again, and a man went down in the wash.

"Got him," he whispered across the room. "Got a flare of lightning to shoot by. He's done for, but they're doing something in that wash. Must be two or three—"

The crashing explosion of Dash Bender's Winchester cut him off. A snarl of pain was heard to go up east of the cabin. Then Dash was moving back, crawling close to the floor to try to find some opening between the logs in the south end of the cabin.

Bullets tore at the door and at the place where Dash had fired from. Flying splinters filled the room. At a lull in the firing, a large party of horsemen were heard riding up from the passage at the south side of the valley. Dash found a crack in the logs and looked out as lightning flashed long enough to give him time to see the men galloping their horses into the black shadows of a little pine thicket three hundred yards away.

"More joining the bunch," he called out to Jim. "Looks like they're going to make it hot enough for us. Must have been eight or nine in the bunch that just come up. Watch close, Jim."

HE PULLED away a little of the moss and clay chinking, enough to open a hole large enough to slide the muzzle of his rifle through. Watching the pines closely, he saw skulking figures start moving out of them. He took quick aim, and squeezed the trigger of his weapon. At the rifle's crash a bellow of voices lifted among the pines. There were quick shadows moving back. He flung another cartridge into the firing chamber, and squeezed the trigger again.

Volleys of oaths came from the pines. With them came a sudden cracking of rifle firing. Bullets thudded, slapped, glanced and whined about the end logs of the cabin. Here and there a bullet found its way between the logs, knocking out bits of dead moss and little puffs of clay. A leg went out from under the cast-iron camp stove in the corner, bits of metal showering the room as the bullet landed. Down came the stove, its rusty pipe clattering, an acrid cloud of spilling ashes filling the room and started Dash Bender and his brother coughing.

Knowing the danger, Dash was moving back. As yet there had been no firing from the little wash west of the cabin, and Dash crawled on to the north end of the room. Outside to northward, he could hear the rifles in that direction still crashing, their bullets slapping against the logs. He dug out another opening, by pulling away clay and moss, then, with his rifle barrel thrust through the crack, he opened fire on the flashes of light that were coming from the edge of a dense fringe of buck brush fifty yards beyond the darker shadows of the cottonwoods.

The flare of light coming over the cliffs to westward seemed to be getting stronger. At the crash of Dash Bender's third shot, a yell lifted from the buck brush. A horse snorted further back in the brush. Thrashing the foliage furiously, the animal plunged into sight. It headed straight for the cabin, then bore away to the west. A yell came from the little ravine where guarded movements were going on, the yell telling that the horse was heading straight toward the shallow wash and being headed away from there.

JIM BENDER fired a few seconds later. Someone cursed him bitterly, but the voice was drowned by a double increase in the firing from southward. Dash crawled to the crack in the east side of the cabin. Bullets were still slapping at the place at odd intervals. He slipped the muzzle of his rifle into the crack, took aim and fired into a clump of bushes seventy yards away. Quick shots tore back at him. A bullet came through the crack. It struck the barrel of his rifle a glancing blow, deflected and slapped against the logs at the rear of the room.

"Something doing over here!" called out Jim. "Somebody's lit a match. Now they're throwing something, Dash."

His rifle crashed the moment the words were out of his mouth. Something struck the roof of the cabin. It bounced, struck the roof again, and went bounding on into the yard to fetch up against a pile of tin cans. Jim Bender's rifle crashed again. A curse came back at him from the wash. A spark-spitting thing took the air from a place further down the wash. It struck a limb of one

of the cottonwoods, held in the branches for an instant, then fell to the ground with a streak of whitish smoke appearing to trail after it.

"They're dynamiting us, Dash!" called out Jim. "That was a stick that hit the roof a second ago. Another fell short at the edge of the yard."

"Then keep down, Jim. We—"

A terrific roar cut him off. The cabin shook. Dirt spilled down from the cracks between the logs supporting the sod roof. The ground trembled as though in the grip of a giant earthquake. The explosion had come from the front yard. Now the air was filed with flying tin cans, leaves and rubbish that pelted the cabin roof with dull thumping sounds.

Another explosion followed, coming from below the limb of the cottonwood. Again the cabin shook and the ground trembled and quivered as though some giant monster was trying to stir itself out of the earth. Clouds of dirt rained from the geyser of dust that had seemed to rise high enough to collide with the sky.

Yells came from every direction now. The rifle firing increased. In the midst of it, Dash fired from the crack in the rear of the room, and a man who had stood up outside suddenly stumbled, weaved crazily, arms beating the air frantically. At a second crash from Dash's rifle, the man pitched headlong to the ground.

Silence suddenly gripped the valley. Thunder broke it, rolling around the cliffs like madly racing chariots. Lightning made a blinding blaze up and down the valley. It struck something to northward. A sudden shower of rain came beating up from the southwest. Wind whipped the great limbs of the cottonwoods. In all that noise of wind, thunder, rains and striking lightning, another explosion took place that seemed to warp the cabin from one end to another.

A stick of dynamite had landed near the northwest corner of the cabin. A beating rain of dirt now came down from the cracks between the roof logs, filling the room with suffocating clouds of dust. For a minute a whitish smoke seemed to cover the outside world like a thick, evil-smelling fog that seeped through every crack in the cabin walls.

There was a long wait that followed. All rifle firing ceased. Only the rain and the wind kept up their stirring, beating blasts. Then thunder started another mad, rumbling race around the cliff-tops. Lightning sizzled and crackled. It struck again. This time a streak of fire appeared to wrap itself around the dead snag of a giant cottonwood fifty yards north of the cabin. There was a crash. Electricity seemed to charge the cabin and leave its burning odor warm in the air.

"Look out!" yelled Jim Bender. "They're throwing another stick at us. If—Drop, Dash! Drop! It landed on the roof!"

A roar shook the place. Splinters flew in all directions. Logs came down. The air was smothered. The old camp stove rattled in the corner. Tin pans coming down from a little board shelf clattered as they struck the floor, then they were covered under a half-ton of dirt and broken logs.

Chapter XIV

RIDERS FROM JUMPING HORSE

HOW am I to know I'm even alive! What kinda mess is all this, anyhow? Jim Black could allus cook up more messy things than any man could swallow. This letter don't tell a man much. It says to help this dude what'll come up here callin' himself Wade Steel, says that that dude's headin' for Horsethief Pass, to follow him in. An' look at that map. Look at the thing! If any man in this bunch can tell me what all them lines, dots an' dashes mean, I'll climb right down from this claybank horse an' eat my old gray hat, leather band an' silver buckle!"

Followed by thirty heavily armed men, darkness had overtaken lanky, gray-bearded old Tom Handcock, the sheriff of Jumping Horse, forcing him and his men to halt in a big canyon where sheer walls of black rock loomed for a thousand feet straight up on either side of them.

"An' who knows but what we're right now waitin' for a cloudbu'st to come swoopin' right down on us," grumbled the old man, pulling at the left side of the long mustache that dropped away at either side of his mouth like ram's horns. "Darker'n a stack o' black cats, an' only a bronc with a mountain sheep for a grandaddy could follow them

ledges an' stick on 'em. I know, 'cause I've been in this country 'fore now—an' allus came away empty handed."

They had left Jumping Horse an hour before noon after Handcock had gathered his possemen quietly. There had been no demonstration. Handcock had merely named his men secretly, instructed them how and when to act. At the appointed hour of meeting, his men had appeared, armed and mounted.

Never had men moved so quietly before in Jumping Horse, for Tom Handcock had feared that there would be certain men in the town who would act as spies to rush the news of any of his movements to the hidden kingdom deep in the heart of Horsethief Pass. His men had had their horses ready. At the same moment, moving like well-drilled cavalrymen, they had ridden into the middle of the street. Without informing the town of where they were going, Handcock had raked his rangy claybank into a gallop, leading his men out of town under a cloud of swirling dust.

They had gone southward until they arrived at the mouth of a big canyon. There Handcock had swung his claybank into the canyon; then at any easy gallop he had pushed northward with his men following close behind him until they disappeared under the frowning, rim-rocked bluffs of Horsethief Pass.

"Seems like I been waitin' the most o' my life for this day to come," the old sheriff had grumbled to a big, fat posseman after they had slowed their horses to an easier pace. "Folks in Jumpin' Horse have been hintin' it around that I'm in cahoots with the Horsethief Pass bunch. Natural that they would say that, I reckon. I ain't done nothin' to bring that hell-hole to an end of its misery, but I'm hopin' some folks will have sense enough to understand that I've tried hard enough. If this map I got leads us there, there'll be no Horsethief Pass when I'm done."

HOUR after hour, they had climbed the dangerous ledges. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Handcock had ridden around a ledge and come face-to-face with The Con Kid, the piano player of the Medicine Hat. The Con Kid had whirled his horse to run when the lanky sheriff halted him with a leveled Colt.

"Now why the hurry, all so sudden-like?" had demanded Handcock. "Yuh seem plumb put out at meetin' company up in these parts. What do yuh think yo're doin'? Kinda lonesome up here, thin fella?"

"I'm goat huntin'," had answered The Con Kid, avoiding the set stare of the old man's eyes. "Just goat-huntin'."

"With that little pea-shooter six-gun, I reckon?" had sneered Handcock, nodding to the cheap, nickel-plated revolver hanging in The Con Kid's patent-leather holster. "Or maybe yuh aims to slip up on 'em an' sprinkle a little salt on their tails, huh? Which would be more gentleman-like than shootin' the little fellas with that four-dollar pop-gun. Yuh oughta tell Jake Slade to give yuh a better shootin' tool next time—"

"I don't know Jake Slade! I—I—"

"Why'd yuh start to run when yuh saw me an' my men comin'? An' why'd yuh shove outa Jumpin' Horse in such an all-fired hurry this mornin'? Takin' Jake the news that Dago Pete Cordoni got killed, huh?"

"Pete—Pete Cordoni didn't have no strings on me. I—I'm goat huntin', I tell you, Handcock. Let me pass!"

"Yuh shore yuh wouldn't like to jine our party an' hunt some nice goats with us? We got salt an' pepper, if yuh'd rather have it. Also, we've got some good Winchesters shoved under our legs."

"I want to pass, Handcock!" had stormed The Con Kid. "You have no right to stop me."

"Shore not! Shore not. Ride right on, thin fella. An' yuh, Tip Marshall," the old man had nodded to a deputy behind him, "just take the thin fella's pop-gun an' fetch him right along with us. I'll feel plum' put out if I can't have a nice goat hunter like him with us. He's such good company, considerin'. Let's ride."

The Con Kid was still in the group, being watched by two stern-faced old cattlemen from the big tableland country south of Jumping Horse. The Con Kid had cursed and stormed when the two men relieved him of his mail-order weapon and tied him in his saddle.

"There'll be a big suit against that old fool of a sheriff!" he had stormed, following the outburst with a steady stream of swearing that finally came to an end in a sputtering fit of coughing. "I'll sue him for enough money to bank-

rupt this whole country for a hundred miles around!"

"Which ain't gonna hurt nobody," one of the cattlemen had grinned. "Lawsuits in Jumpin' Horse give a fella somethin' to lis'en to."

THE Con Kid was silent now, and for some reason appeared satisfied with his place as a prisoner among the horsemen. The trail had been lost. In the darkness, there would be no danger of the old sheriff and his men finding it, and The Con Kid grinned in the darkness. That smile of satisfaction was short lived, for the two old cattlemen saw that smile as a flash of lightning lighted the canyon, and both men nodded to each other.

Old Zack Settler, owner of the Circle K, was the first to startle The Con Kid by suddenly standing up in his stirrups to deliver a short ultimatum.

"See here, Tom," exclaimed Settler, "why should we stand here chawin' our tongues out 'bout that map? I'm admittin' that that thing's hard to follow, but what's the use o' followin' it when we got a map right here that'll lead up right where we wanta go? This map can talk, 'cause it's been talkin' like a phoneygraf ever since three o'clock. It's right sociable, considerin'. It'll do just what yuh tell it, providin' yuh tell it in the right way."

"What do yuh mean, Zack?"

"The Con Kid, settin' here beside me an' Phil Butler. All us folks know what Con Kid was doin' in these hills. There ain't no use in beatin' 'round with 'im. He knows what we wanta know. He'll tell us what we wanta know, if yuh'll leave him to me an' Phil for a little spell. Me an' Phil's made a heap harder dudes talk. Ride on up the canyon aways, boys."

"I don't know nothin'!" Hhe Con Kid's voice betrayed sudden terror. "I'll swear I don't!"

"Yuh'd swear hell was an ice factory," grunted Settler; "but yuh'll talk. I'll give yuh just ten minutes to start in. If yuh ain't started talkin' in ten minutes, I'm gonna set your hair afire with a match. That ain't no joke, ain't no foolin', ain't no talkin' through my hat. Yuh'll do it, do what I tell yuh. If yuh don't, your hair's gonna burn; an' don't think hair won't burn. I've seen it, an' it was on a head a heap stronger than yours; on a head that didn't have all its insides blowed out at the nose an' hacked out at the mouth. Scratch a match an' see what time it is, Phil. Ride on, the rest o' yuh. If Tom Handcock don't like what we're gonna do, somebody jab a gun in his belly an' keep 'im quiet.

"You all know The Con Kid ain't on the straight," he went on, voice bitter, eyes watching The Con Kid from their corners. "It's been known a long time in Jumpin' Horse that this fella has been havin' somethin' to do with Horsethief Pass. He was hand in glove with Dago Pete. We caught him in here this afternoon. 'Goat huntin'!' with a cap pistol, which is a lie on the face of anybody's watch. We've hunted horsethieves 'fore now. We know what to do when we find one—or a man what helps 'em. Watchin' the time, Phil?"

"Shore am," grunted Butler. "Eight minutes done passed. Move on, yuh other dudes. Me an' Zack are the pair o' wildcats what know what to do if—"

"Yuh can't do nothing like that to me!" shrilled The Con Kid. "There's a law that says every arrested man—"

"Shut up!" snapped Settler. "We don't give a whoop what the law says. I aint never had to go to the law for nothin'. I'm a shade old to start in runnin' to it now. An' your time's gettin' short—"

"Aw set his head afire an' be done with it!" growled Phil Butler. "I don't aim to stand here all night gassin' with a jackass like him." A match flared. "Hold still, Kid. Your hair's long an' dry—"

The Con Kid screamed like a woman in terror when Zack Settler jerked off his small black hat and the match moved toward him.

"Do yuh talk?" boomed Settler. "Yuh got one second to say 'yes!'"

"Yes!" screeched the Kid. "I—I'll show you the trail!"

ALONG black ledges high above tumbling and frothing waterways, under great overhanging cliffs and up muddy creek beds in the floors of narrow canyons where it was so dark it was impossible for a man to see a hand in front of him, The Con Kid, shivering wet, cursing bitterly, led the way. Sheriff Tom Handcock followed closely behind him, keeping a rope fastened to the Kid's saddle horn.

Behind Handcock were other men with ropes, following along like Alpine climbers.

"Don't try any tricks," Handcock kept warning his prisoner. "If yuh do, I'll swing yuh over a ledge with a rope 'round your neck. That'll be the end o' you an' your health tour in these parts."

"You'll not be half so smart when my lawyer in Chicago gets through with you and your gang!" raved The Con Kid. "He'll show you a thing or two about law, you long-legged, hatchet-faced—"

"Which won't count a-tall, young un. We ain't givin' a whoop about your lawyer in Chicago. It's a big rustler roost we're aimin' to find tonight, an' its you who's gonna lead us there or get yourself hung to a ledge for tryin' to pull some fancy stuff on this bunch."

Rain beat them furiously at times. Finally a far off sound of firing came to them. Now and then they heard the rolling rumble of giant explosions.

"Gettin' close," grumbled Handcock. "I reckon this squirt knows the way mighty well. "Only a cat could follow some o' these places."

Suddenly they turned a bend in the ledge. They were on a high level now with rocky walls looming on either side of them. A haze of light in the sky showed ahead of them. The Con Kid appeared suddenly nervous.

"Reckon we're gettin' somewhere, all right," grunted Handcock. "If—"

"Shoot!" shrilled The Con Kid, calling out to someone in front of him and whirling his horse to one side. "Shoot! Its the sheriff from Jumping Horse with a posse. He'll—"

The crash of a Winchester cut The Con Kid off. Handcock jumped his horse to one side. The Winchester blazed again. The Con Kid cried out in the voice of a wounded cougar. Hands flying up, body buckling, he fell backward across his horse's rump. His attempt to betray the men he was leading had ended in his own death, for the second shot from the rifle had torn a hole through his chest heart high.

Handcock opened fire on the spot where the flashes of flame had appeared in front of him. Men behind him started shooting. A burly man behind the rocks yelled hoarsely. He lurched upward, a red stream spouting from a bullet wound an inch below the bridge of his nose. He spun around crazily as a volley of shots tore at him; then he was down.

"Catch The Con Kid's horse!" boomed Handcock. "I reckon we've found Rattlesnake Slade's hole in the wall at last!"

Like dark fluid released from a bottle, they poured out into the valley. The rain had let up. The sky was clearing in broken patches of clouds slowly drifting apart. Bluejoint grass whipped their stirrups as they struck the edge of a soggy lowland. Wet bushes raked them. Somewhere far ahead lightning shot a weak flare through the heavens. They heard a distant crashing of rifle firing and spurred their horses in that direction.

BULLETS tore at them suddenly, coming from an almost hidden cabin in a grove of cottonwoods off to their right. A horse, raked across the rump by one of the bullets, snorted and plunged. The animal's owner snarled, retaining his seat with difficulty from the unexpected pitching. Sheriff Tom Handcock's harsh voice rang with an order that was directed to every man.

"Swing out! Drop low 'cross your horses' necks! Indian fashion! Open up for a round on that cabin, but it ain't the main one!"

More bullets tore at them. A party of horsemen had suddenly appeared in front of them by riding out of a narrow pass. Shots cracked at each other. Handcock swerved to the left so quickly that his horse was lying almost on its side as the animal made the turn.

"Swing out!" repeated Handcock, his voice rising like an anguished wailing as his horse plunged into buck brush higher than his head. "Don't stay bunched! You'll go down fast if yuh do! Give 'em hell!"

The buck brush hid them now, the party having separated, one group turning to the right, the other, the one following Handcock, going to the left. Four men, by prearranged orders, had halted in the passage mouth to prevent anyone escaping once the main body had ridden on. Now, keeping in the brush and out of sight, the party on the right swung straight for the cabin in the cottonwoods.

A stubborn resistance faced them. Two horses went down, snorting and

pawing the air. A man lurched askew in his saddle and grabbed frantically for his saddle horn. His horse swung away from the group, making a quick turn and heading back toward the valley entrance as if fully aware that safety lay in that direction. The rider kept his seat during a dozen spasmodic jumps of the horse, then, slowly, the man was falling. He slipped quietly out of his saddle and went dropping down in the brush. His horse, snorting and suddenly beginning to pitch wildly, rushed on for the valley entrance.

The cabin loomed close. Shots tore from its slitlike windows and from the doorway. Like a storm suddenly released, the horsemen bore down on it, the riders firing with six-shooters, their bullets slapping splinters from the logs and beating through the doorway and windows. An old horsethief crumpled up in the doorway. Another leaped out of it and started to run. Two yelling horsemen bore toward him, six-shooters blazing. The pursued man turned suddenly, dropping to one knee. He lifted a rider out of his saddle and sent the man rolling back over his horse's rump. The other rider kept going. His six-shooter blazed almost in the kneeling man's face. The man went down, rocked back to his knees, fired a shot that went low; then he was down again from a roaring Colt that licked a hot gash of flame across his back and tore his crime-poisoned life into an everlasting sleep of death.

Yells came from the cabin now. Three men were crying out in fear-ridden voices and trying to surrender. Voices barked commands at them, filling the air with oaths. The men came stumbling outside, their hands thrust high above their heads. Men swarmed around them like a swirling cloud. A rope hissed through the air, settling around a horsethief's neck. A hanging bee was about to take place when a grizzled posseman reared up in the stirrups of a long-legged dapple gray and shouted it down.

"We ain't doin' that!" bawled the posseman. "Not yet, anyhow. There's a place for these squirts. Snake their guns off'n them, if they've got any on 'em now, an' rush 'em over to the passage where the other boys can hold 'em."

"What's the use o' holdin' 'em?" snarled another posseman. "Now's as good a time as any to finish 'em off."

"Do as I tell yuh, an' be quick about it! I'm in charge o' this bunch. We ain't got time, anyhow. There's a lot'a work yet to do! Away with 'em to the passage! Away with 'em!"

TOM HANDCOCK'S group were dismounted and fighting desperately. Never had the old sheriff dreamed that there were so many men in Horsethief Pass. More men had ridden out of the passage in the cliffs northward. Some of the men had left their horses on the run. Now those men were hiding back in the rocks along the foot of the cliffs, the flashes of their rifles appearing here and there.

Bullets sang a mirthless song of death through the buck brush. Horses snorted. Men cursed. A man went down, dropping into a heap. Another swore bitterly, and sat down, clutching at a right shoulder that had suddenly begun to spout blood. Something slapped Handcock with a sting like the blow of a quirt. He reached up and felt of his face. A Winchester's bullet had opened his cheek, slitting it to the bone.

By this time, the bulk of the men who had carried out the attack on the cabin were swinging back. Shooting along through the brush, hanging low over their saddles, they were like the twisting tail of a cyclone sweeping close along the earth. Roaring guns licked their blazes of ragged, quickly-appearing, quickly-disappearing light from the tops of the bobbing saddles. A horse screamed with pain, and went down, the cry of the animal anything but a cry that would have been expected from a horse. The animal's rider flung clear and went ducking behind a small stack of boulders at the edge of the brush.

The human cyclone swept on. Right into the face of the blazing guns that were trying desperately to turn them, the horsemen struck the foot of the cliffs. Scattering shots, fired frantically with terror-stricken hands, tore at them as the men behind rocks turned to flee. Here and there a man stumbled and went down.

Remounted, Tom Handcock was soon throwing his men to the support of the fighting. Like a buckling cloud of destruction, his men swept forward. In a few moments the bulk of the fighting was over with the horsethieves along.

the foot of the cliffs suddenly throwing down their weapons and rushing into the open with their hands thrust high above their heads.

A roundup followed. Men tried to hide in the brush. Riders drove them out, lashing them with quirts or knocking them unconscious with rifle butts when they turned to make quick attempts to flee. One middle-aged horse-thief, a man with a lawless career of blood strewn from the Hudson Bay country to Sonora, suddenly reopened the fight. He shot a man from the saddle of a big bay. Shots tore back at him. He went down on one knee, his hat off, two six-shooters blazing. Bullets poured into him. He went down twice before the end came with thirteen bullets in his hardened body.

"Shove 'em all toward the passage mouth!" boomed Handcock when the last of the firing came to an end. "Six men stay with 'em. Shoot any who makes a break or even looks like he'd like to! The rest o' yuh follow me!"

They plunged into the passage in the cliffs northward. Winding and turning for a matter of seven hundred yards, they were suddenly pouring into The Roost valley. Another fight faced them. From the doorway of the main cabin across the little creek from the saloon, a double-barreled shotgun whipped them with buckshot. Shots lashed back at the cabin. A six-shooter roared at them from the door of the saloon.

Fannydog, evidently cowed by the howling army of men sweeping toward her with a rumbling of hoofs that seemed to tremble the earth, suddenly appeared. She rushed forward, leaving her shotgun behind her. Hands thrown up, voice screeching surrender, she halted in an opening out from the shadows of the big cottonwoods.

"Rattlesnake Slade's squaw," roared Sheriff Handcock. "Somebody take charge of her an' see that she doesn't get away!"

Another shot roared at them from the doorway of the saloon. A hail of rifle bullets crashed back at it. A man stumbled out into the square of hard-packed earth between the hitching-racks. He dropped to his knees, tried to lift a hot Colt, then went down as horses came plunging over the hitching-rack to his left to smother him in a noisy, beating cloud.

Chapter XV

SHOT DOWN

DIRT and broken ends of rotted logs lay everywhere. Dash and Jim were shocked and stunned. It seemed nothing short of a miracle that they had been at the other end of the cabin when the dynamite had exploded on the corner of the roof just opposite the rusty camp stove. They lay there, faces smeared with dust and dirt, lungs choking, trying to think, trying to formulate some plan for their next move.

Another stick of dynamite came out of the wash. It landed true, coming straight through the opening in the roof and rolling down the pile of dirt and broken logs to land within a few inches of Dash. With the first sputtering a streak of sparks, Dash picked it up. With a jerk, he had the fuse out, hurling it and the detonating cap over beyond the dirt where the cap exploded with the *crack* of a light-calibered revolver.

At that instant, another explosion shook the room. Another stick of dynamite had landed against the corner logs of the building below the dirt pile. A cloud of dust swirled upward. Dash saw an opening of light between broken logs. In last moment desperation, he seized his brother's hand and pulled him hurriedly to his feet.

"We'll have to make a run for it," he whispered. "Get ready, Jim."

They moved quickly to the hole made by the last stick of dynamite. Clouds of dust were blotting out everything outside. In the middle of those dust clouds, another stick hissed through the air. It struck the corner of the cabin, bounced away and landed in a pile of wood ashes at the edge of the yard. There was another explosion. With the wet top of the ashes blown away, the dry ashes now came swirling up. Wind caught the clouds. In an instant the cottonwood grove was a solid mass of gray.

"Come on," whispered Dash. "We'll have to chance it."

They slipped quickly out of the jagged opening between the logs. It was like walking straight into a solid wall, for the dust and ashes were so thick it was impossible for them to see their hands in front of them. A Godsend for the occasion! A miraculous turn of events al-

lowing two doomed men to escape.

Behind them roared another explosion, but they were thankful for explosions now, for every explosion was adding more dust to the screen that was concealing their movements; and they kept going, each carrying a rifle and extra belts of cartridges. Soon brush confronted them. Beyond that brush, the air would be clear and the dangers would increase.

A grumble of voices came from somewhere ahead as the two escaping men dropped to their knees to enter the brush. Dash was leading the way. Jim was right behind him. They moved a few feet at a time, often halting to drop flat on their stomachs and lie like dead men while they listened.

Another explosion shook the ground behind them. Then came another, and another. Splinters from rotted logs filled the air, showing that the dynamite-throwers were rapidly reducing the cabin to wreckage. Rifles cracked stabbing blazes between the explosions. A voice easily recognized as the voice of Jake Slade bellowed orders.

"Watch your shootin'!" the man was calling out. "Your bullets are cuttin' through to us. Stop throwin' the dynamite for a minute! Let that dust settle. I think we got 'em!"

THE silence that followed was a tense one for the two Benders. They struck a deer trail in the brush. Crawling along without a sound they were soon two hundred yards from the cabin. Now they were moving down in a little swale. A horse snorted in front of them. A voice spoke low words somewhere slightly off to the left, then the slinking figures of two men appeared.

Rifles thrust forward, the two Benders waited. The oncoming men passed within a few feet of them to come to a halt behind a thicker clump of brush a few yards to the right. There the men squatted down, whispering in low tones.

"Never see'd Jake so het-up in my life," one man told the other. "I reckon these two dudes musta turned his hair upside-down."

"An' good reason," grumbled the other. "If them dudes get away, yuh know what it means for ever' man in this Hossthief Pass country. They'd be leadin' men in here like an army on the move. Ever'body in the surroundin' country wants Jake Slade. They want him bad; they'd do most anything to get their hands on him an' a good stout rope 'round his neck. It ain't us they want so much. They lay the blame of ever'thing that happens on Jake. So gettin' these dudes means life or death to Jake—to ever' damn one of us."

"Which ain't sayin' there ain't men on the outside what ain't got a cue how to get in here now," muttered the other man. "It's me that's watchin' ever'thing's gonna take place. Once all this rowin' gets done, I'm shovin' outa here. It's a hotbed for a man to get killed, Andy. Yuh know that. A lota the boys know it; an' a lot of 'em are gonna duck out, once the chance comes. A lot would go tonight, but yuh know Jake. He's got the word passed that nobody ain't to leave; an' he's got four men guardin' the passes what'll see that nobody don't leave. Jake knows that old Billy Hell is starin' him slap-dab in the face at last. He seems to know that this dude, Dash Bender, has tipped off folks on the outside; an' I ain't trustin' Jake much further'n yuh could throw my paint hoss by the tail."

"Same here, Walt. Jake ain't square. Never has been with no man. He'll use yuh as long as he can. When he's done, well— All o' which we knowed when we dropped in here. But there wasn't nothin' else to do with that posse close on our heels. If Jake had kept his hands off'n that Jim Bender, we could'a gone on. We'd been deep in Old Mexico by now."

"Listen! What's that?"

ECHOING reports of rifle firing came from southward like breathed whispers. A voice beyond the cabin called out to someone. A voice a little further away answered.

Another shouted to Jake Slade.

"What is that, Jake? Hear them sounds? Gun talkin'!"

A breathless silence gripped the air. It seemed that every man had stopped to strain his ears listening. The two men to the right of Dash and Jim stirred. An oath came from the man who had been addressed as Andy.

"There's hell a-poppin' in the other valleys south o' here, Walt!" cried the man. "Listen!"

Jake Slade roared something. A half-

dozen voices shouted back at him. Another cursed him from the blackness of a heavy line of brush east of the wrecked cabin.

"Keep your damn head on your shoulders until yuh find out about it!" boomed Slade. "Don't ever'body get the daylights scared outa 'em all at once—"

"But there's a fight goin' on south o' here, yuh sky-lookin' old fool!" interrupted a voice close to Slade. "If yuh got any sense a-tall—"

The words were cut short by the slap of a blow. Someone cursed a muffled oath. It seemed that the cabin had been forgotten for the moment. Slade thought of it a second later.

"Don't get scared to death!" he bawled. "Watch that cabin—"

"Cabin's blowed all to bits," interrupted a voice, coming from the darkness close to the wrecked building. "Them last sticks just ruined it."

"Then go inside!" thundered Slade, following the words with an oath. "Go in an' light a match. See that them dudes are in there. If they are, we're done with this end o' the job."

By the sounds of shuffling feet moving through dead leaves and brush, men were moving up to the cabin. Looking back over his shoulder, Dash Bender saw a match flare up. It dimly outlined the little building, showing that the north end of it had been blown away. And now other matches were being struck, the weak flames lifting here and there. A hoarse cry suddenly came from the inside of the wrecked structure.

"Gone! Gone, Jake! No sign—"

"Maybe they're under that dirt an' logs," interrupted another voice. "Here, somebody gimme a hand to move some o' this stuff."

Jake Slade was heard cursing as he moved out of the wash and started hurrying toward the cabin. Other lights now flared. Someone was lighting a torch of grass and dry sticks. Slade cursed someone like a madman on a rampage.

"Any fool could see that they ain't under that dirt an' truck!" he barked. "They got outa here somehow. Watch out, ever'body! Watch close!"

THE two men to the right of the Benders moved suddenly. They came tramping forward. To remain hidden longer was impossible now, for the two men were coming straight toward the hiding pair.

Dash came to his hands and knees with a jerk. With a leap, he was on his feet. He swung his rifle as he took a quick step forward. A six-shooter roared almost in his face, the shot so close that the licking blaze from it burned his right cheek. Then the man with the six-shooter was trying to leap back, but the rifle butt, swung with all Dash Bender's strength, struck him on the top of the head. He went down like a steer felled with a butcher's mallet.

Jim Bender's Winchester roared at that instant. The man who had been addressed as Andy went down with a bullet through his chest. He made one half-conscious effort to get to his feet, then dropped flat on his face, his long legs kicking the brush spasmodically.

"Run for it!" cried Dash.

Yells and curses roared behind them. Rifles and six-shooters cracked and roared, their bullets cutting down the brush. Dash stumbled and fell. Jim whirled back and helped him to his feet. A shot roared at them from the left. Both men fired at it. Someone cursed and went thrashing back in the brush.

They were going down a short slope now. Dash remembered that he had heard a horse snort. He was on the lookout for the animal when he plunged into a little opening in the brush, and there in front of him stood the two horses they had ridden from the lower valleys several hours before.

"Grab the one on the right!" cried Dash.

They leaped into the saddles of the two animals. A rifle cracked at them from somewhere behind. Its bullet whistled overhead. Both men drove home their spurs. The horses snorted and lunged away, entering thick brush dotted with bulky little jack-pines that concealed them from the view of the men back at the wrecked cabin.

Riding recklessly, swinging his horse to the right and left to avoid the stubby pines, Dash was again leading the way. They came to the foot of the little slope and plunged their horses into a shallow wash that streaked away in the darkness toward the rock slide at the north end of the valley. Hoofbeats sounded behind them as they struck a sandy level in the wash that deadened the thudding of their own animals' hurrying feet.

AN OPENING stared at them ahead, but there was no way around it. They plunged into it. Evidently the men behind had been waiting for them to appear in that opening, for the air was suddenly alive with whistling and crying bullets while rifles cracked like machine-guns from the great blot of inky cottonwood shadows around the cabin.

Jim reeled in his saddle just as they reached the opposite side of the opening and raced into the shelter of a long fringe of jackpines. Dash, always watching, reined close.

"They got you?" he cried, voice full of quick alarm, face pale. "Bad, Jim? Did they, boy?"

"Not bad—Dash!" There was a catch in Jim Bender's voice. He was gripping his Winchester and holding the saddle horn with the same hand. "Just in the shoulder. High up. Keep going. I—I'll make it."

"You take the lead," ordered Dash, dropping in behind him. "Keep in these pines. I'll ride close to watch in case you fall. We'll soon be hitting the rock slide. If we stay to the right, we can be almost at the top of it before we hit the open again."

Bullets kept coming through the trees, knocking off branches to the right and left of them. Somewhere back there in the din of rifle firing and the beating sounds of following hoofs, the bellowing voice of Rattlesnake Slade was making the air ring with commands. Dash suddenly halted and whirled his horse on a little benchlike rise.

It was Dash Bender's turn now. Where the men behind him had taken advantage of him and his brother as they crossed the opening, it would be his opportunity. With rifle jerked upward, he waited. A horse soon showed below, then a rider was in the open. Dash took careful aim, and fired. A faint yell came to him as the leading horseman went rolling back over the cantle of his saddle, causing the men behind him to swing to the right and left.

Dash fired again, then whirled his horse to run as bullets started slapping through the low trees at the spot where the flashes of flame from his rifle had appeared. He overtook Jim within a few minutes.

"I'm feeling better, Dash!" the brother exclaimed. "Bullet must have hit a bone and glanced. Made me sicker than hell for a few minutes. I'm still a little dizzy. Maybe you'd better lead the way a while."

They were nearing the top of the rock slide a short time later. Dash was still leading. An opening showed in front of them. Beyond that opening would be the narrow, crevicelike passage leading out of the valley. Into it, through it and beyond it would be safety—or, at least, the freedom of a wild sea of badland country.

In their mad race, Dash had forgotten the man that would be guarding this outlet. He plunged into the opening. Jim was only a few yards behind him. No shots came from behind them now, but—like a rising ghost—a figure reared up from behind a pile of rocks in front of them. Dash yelled a warning. He made one frantic attempt to turn his horse, but a Winchester crashed thirty yards in front of him. He felt something slap him, something that tore through his chest like a red-hot iron; then he was falling, falling, falling!

The marksman guard in the pass had dropped himself a man, had lifted him out of the saddle with a .44-.40 Winchester carbine.

CHAPTER XVI

"They'll never pass!"

PLEADING, sometimes sobbing, sometimes cursing bitterly, crazily, a voice came to Dash Bender's ears. It seemed far, far away. At times it was like a ringing gong. He awoke at last to find Jim Bender squatting over him in a little bowl of rocks.

"I got 'im, Dash!" Jim Bender was crying. "He got you, Dash, but I got him. Dropped him center with a bullet straight between the eyes. His gun jammed, Dash. Jammed tight, then he had the guts to ask me not to blow him down. And we're holding this pass. There's other men down there. Must be men from Jumping Horse. They're fighting to beat hell, and the rustler gang have been trying to break through here. They'll never pass! I swear to gosh they won't—are you awake? You've got a big hole in your chest, but it's high up, Dash. No danger if I can get you to a doctor."

Head swimming, eyes dull, Dash

finally lay propped back against the rocks with a Winchester in his limp hands. It seemed that he went to sleep again. When his eyes opened, Jim Bender was fighting a stand-off battle with a Winchester whose loading lever seemed to swing back and forth like a madly swinging clock pendulum.

Bullets were beating their rain of lead against the rocks, bullets that splattered, skipped and sang their barbaric song of war, of misery, of hurt and slow or instant death; bullets that fell like a beating hail and sickened the air with their incessant whining; bullets that seemed to come from everywhere like swarms of buzzing hornets.

Viciously, forward and back, forward and back, the Winchester's lever in Jim Bender's right hand was working. Now he had dropped the rifle. Now he was firing with a six-shooter. Close in front of him, hoofs beating the rocks, horses snorting and rearing, an army of men were coming; an army of cursing and yelling men who seemed to have but one mad desire in mind. That desire was to ride down the man in front of them and sweep on into the pass.

Dash Bender's head cleared. With a sudden start, he lurched forward, bringing up his Winchester with a superhuman effort. He started firing. His wound tortured him, but the mob of mounted men in front of him started falling back, their horses rearing and snorting. Here and there a horse went down. A man dropped to the left. Another slipped from his saddle and went rolling downhill in the slide rocks.

"Drove 'em back again!" cried Jim Bender, jamming cartridges in his rifle to be prepared for the next charge. "That's the third time they've tried it. Maybe they would have made it if it hadn't been for your help right at the needed time—how're you feeling, Dash?"

"Dizzy—sick at my stomach."

"I dressed your wound the best I could," Jim Bender informed him. "Didn't have much to do it with. Found a couple of clean handkerchiefs in your pocket and wadded up the holes with them. Bullet went through clean."

"But what about your own wound, Jim? I remember now that you were hit. Seems I've been out of my head for a time."

"You were, Dash, but it doesn't matter now. My wound's still there. It's not bad. They must have slapped me with a thirty-thirty. The hole is small and clean cut. Listen! Look down there!"

A furious warring was going on below. Lines of horsemen were darting here and there. Strings of fire were tearing from the backs of the running horses. A medley of hoarse yells was continually lifting, the din of shooting rolling up from the valley floor.

Two hurrying lines of horsemen started dashing toward the mouth of the passageway leading into the valleys southward. A stubborn firing came from the mouth of the passage. In a moment the horsemen were falling back, fleeing brokenly, voices yelling and cursing.

"Somebody's holding them!" cried Jim Bender. "That's the fourth time they've tried to storm that passageway. Men from Jumping Horse must be here, Dash. I've heard Jake Slade cursing a dozen times. Seems that he's keeping back and throwing his men into the thick of it. Listen! There he goes again! Hear him? I couldn't forget that voice if I hadn't heard it in a thousand years. Hear him? He's trying to force his men into something."

It was a battle down there being as bitterly fought as any man ever witnessed. Men who knew that their hours of doom were at hand were making a frantic fight to escape that doom; and at every hand, that doom faced them.

Another mounted body of men went charging the south passage. Again that steady, dogged firing drove them back, sent their horses rearing and plunging. It was a weird drama being staged under a night sky where the heavens were giving just enough light for the two men high above on the rock slide to watch the battle rage.

Suddenly there was a halt in the firing. Loose horses were galloping about down there in the little valley floor. Gradually the horses became quiet. At the end of an hour, the animals that had not been wounded seemed to have forgotten the excitement. Little groups of them could be seen here and there. A few of them were grazing.

Dash and Jim watched, fascinated, wondering what would be the next turn of events. Jake Slade was no longer being heard. It occurred to the two Benders that the man might have met his due reward down there with a bullet; yet it

did not seem that Jake Slade would have died without a general disturbance being noticeable.

"He's still down there," whispered Jim Bender. "That devil's too mean to die so easily. He's up to something, Dash. He's given the men from Jumping Horse the slip. Before they know it, he'll be right on top of them."

But another hour passed, and still nothing had happened. It seemed that the men from Jumping Horse had settled down to wait for daylight to finish their rustler roundup.

"Maybe they've got scattered so badly nobody can tell who the other fellow is," whispered Dash. "Things often happen like that in night fighting. It's certain these rustlers won't be surrendering unless they are driven straight to the wall and see no possible way out of it except to get shot dead in their tracks."

Another hour passed. A night bird piped a little note in a fringe of brush down the rock slide. An owl boomed his hunting cry somewhere back beyond the cliff-tops. The night bird started to pipe another note, but the note was cut short, Jim squeezed his brother's arm gently.

"Keep down," he whispered. "Somebody's sneaking up this way. Listen."

A piece of shale moved ever so gently somewhere below. Jim squeezed his brother's arm again, but he did not speak. After a long time, another faint sound came to them. This time the sound was closer. There was a longer wait, then a pebble moved. Jim Bender located the exact spot the sound had come from.

"There's a little rocky wash about three feet deep over there," he whispered, lifting his hand to point to their left. "You fell into it when you dropped off your horse. Somebody's in the wash. He's trying to sneak through to the pass and make a getaway."

Leaving his rifle behind him, Jim Bender slid forward, worming his way through the rocks like a slowly crawling snake. With a six-shooter thrust forward, he came upon the wash gradually and dropped flat behind a big slab rock that was turned up on its side.

Minutes passed. Bender listened. The owl beyond the cliff tops hooted again. The night bird below piped sadly, then everything was still again. After a minute more, Bender heard the faintest sound of moving gravel in the wash. With a jerk, he was on his knees, six-shooter thrust forward.

A roaring gash of flame tore at him. He fired as the flame leaped toward him, his own flash appearing to collide with the other. There was a quick grunt, then the man who had been slipping along in the wash was falling, the top of his head blown away.

"Dash! Dash!" cried Jim Bender a second later, wiping away a stain of blood where a bullet had grazed his cheek, "it's Jake Slade—Rattlesnake Slade trying to slip out and leave his men cold!"

MORNING came. The red bars of an awakening sun gleamed from the cool heavens over the cliff tops and fell in broadening ribbons upon the rain-wet valley floors. There had been no more fighting. Tom Handcock, with his posse scattered and a great danger facing him of shooting down his own men by mistake, had called a halt. Daylight had found men surrendering. Seven of the possemen had gone to the top of the rock slide. A rude stretcher had been made. Dash Bender had been brought down. Then had followed Jim Bender on a horse that had been led up for him.

Men had hurried away during the night to go for doctors in Jumping Horse to care for both wounded possemen and outlaws. By an hour after sunup, the men were back with two doctors riding with them. The Roost saloon had been turned into a dressing station.

"How's them Bender dudes?" demanded Tom Handcock. "Bad hurt?"

"One had an ugly wound, but he'll come out of it," grinned the doctor. Thin chance of killing a fellow like that. The other has a wound in the shoulder. Nothing more than a clean bullet hole. No reason why they shouldn't live to be a hundred. Tell me about the fight, Tom What—"

"See here now," grumbled Handcock, "don't yuh go askin' a lota fool questions now, Doc. I'm so damn happy my blood's boilin'—the Hossthief Pass gang jest ain't no more!"

THE STRAY-MAN

by GLENN A. CONNOR

Some top-hands can do a heap more than throw a rope and ride a horse. The J-Six rep was like that. If you don't believe it, ask the boys who rode the Carlink roundup.

Author of "Buck Brady's Luck," "The Deputy from Lightning Creek," etc.

THE Carlink started curiously as the new arrival rode into camp, drove his string into the rope corral, and proceeded to slip his bedroll from the back of one of his extras. No word of greeting welcomed him. One would have at once said there was something unfriendly in their attitude. But if the new man noted anything unusual in their continued silence he gave no sign.

Noticing the saddled horses already tied to the wheels of the wagons the new rep left his extras inside the corral until he learned his orders, in other words whether he was due for a shift of guard that night or not. After stripping his riding gear from his mount and turning him loose to join the cavvy grazing not far distant, he approached the men at supper.

"Who's the ram here?" he inquired in a low yet distinct voice that gave no hint of timidness or yet presumptuousness, just a definiteness hard to ignore.

"Me." A tall, gaunt, hard-featured man looked at him with a scowl.

"I'm Jack Smith, representin' the J Six," the newcomer said, meeting the scowl with a friendly grin.

The foreman's lip curled. "I ain't blind," he growled.

A dull flush stole up through Smith's smooth, brown features. His gray eyes seemed to grow darker. But it had passed in a second. A grin that was not entirely apologetic exposed his white teeth. "Excuse my error," he murmured. "You was lookin' me over so strong I thought maybe yuh overlooked the brand on my mounts." There was a dryness in his tone that did not miss them. A gleam flashed

into the eyes of the other reps. But the foreman's scowl darkened and was repeated on the faces of the wagon-men.

"My gosh, if we ain't corralled a dude cowboy!" ejaculated one softly, but sufficiently loud for the new rep to hear. "Boys, look at them clothes—an' I bet he even brushes his teeth!"

Smith's attire was not so fanciful as neat and clean, but none the less serviceable. Where the majority wore jeans and cotton shirts his were California wool pants and shirt of light flannel, that set his muscular form like they had been cut to fit. Dubbing him a dude was obviously an uncalled for insult.

"Well, didn't he say he was reppin' for the J Six?" another contributed. "Ol' Boyle has sent us everything from sheepherders to college men, an' I been wonderin' what he'd send next. Si's right—it's a dude."

"An' that name of his—it's plumb numerous. Boys, know how come? I always been curious myself why there was so many Smiths in the country. Last fall the Ol' Man sent me to Omaha with a shipment of cattle, yuh recollects. Well, that's where I make the discovery I'm just reminded of. Wanderin' about the town, sort of takin' in the sights, I happens to look up an' sees a big sign on the top of one of them big brick buildin's, an' it says Smith's Factory."

All this was spoken as though Smith were not present, although made audible to his ears. Such raillery is natural with cowboys. But this was not good-natured joshing. Smith still smiled but it was only a smile of the lips.

"Well, I hope he don't try to high-hat us," the foreman added the final thrust.

Black and gray eyes met and clashed. Nor was the foreman unconscious of the steady, uncowed regard of the other. He made quick note of the straight, athletic figure and was duly impressed by the way the muscles bulged. Dave Woods was a fighter himself and a quick judge of a man. But he was also a bully and a merciless driver. It bespoke his success as foreman of the Carlink, as hard and vicious a crew as ever forked leather.

"You heard what I said, did yuh?" he snarled. "We're just common cow-folks here, but you an' yore pretty clothes ain't goin' to run no airs on us. Savvy?"

Smith's quiet, smiling receptance of this nearly got the foreman's goat. "Better wait'll yuh're hurt 'fore yuh start hollerin'," he drawled. Then abruptly he changed the subject. "I come some little piece today an' my horses don't fare well on dirt. Is it guard for me or a night of uninterrupted slumber?"

"Catch yuh up a night-hoss—you'll do graveyard trick tonight with Lofty," snapped Woods.

And this was Jack Smith's introduction into Carlink society.

SMITH, after just one day with the Carlink wagons, was very well informed as to their characteristics. Dave Woods was a hard-boiled, sour sort of hombre that would ruin the disposition of an angel. The wagon-men were on a par with their foreman, which was natural under the circumstances. Woods, Smith learned, hired his own crew and hired to type. Their humor ran to the vicious as he was quick to see.

And the brunt of their rough horseplay was Kid Duffy, an awkward slip of a boy who took their tantalizing and rawhiding in shrinking silence. It was at once apparent to Smith that Duffy was range-green. But the boy had nerve. Smith satisfied himself on this score as time passed and he never heard a whimper or complaint pass Duffy's lips. A man given more to observation than words he was not slow to see there was some deeper motive behind the boy's rawhiding. Here was where his sense of fair play commenced to assert itself and to experience a sudden rising indignation.

But Smith held his peace for the time being, watching and waiting. He argued it was the foreman's duty to intercede, but Woods did nothing.

Smith found himself paired off one day on circle with Jerry Mills, an Acorn rep. Maybe Smith would not have brought up the subject had he not received encouragement, for as a rule Smith was accustomed to keeping his own council and using his eyes instead of asking questions. But Mills was an insatiable gasser, who could stand anything but silence. This morning in question he marked Smith's silent, thoughtful mood and was prompted to speak with that flippancy which was characteristic of him.

"What's on yore chest, Smithy? That long face of yores don't fit in with this bright, sun-shiny mornin'. Tell papa yore troubles if it'll ease yore troubled conscience." A broad, inviting grin accom-

panied Mills' words that caused Smith to ask an impulsive question.

"Say, Acorn, what's the Carlink's grudge against young Duffy?"

Mills flashed him a narrow-eyed look. Smith was conscious of a subtle change immediately in the other, something guarded in his manner that his careless retort did not in the least deceive Smith. "Hell, cowboy, did yuh ever know an outfit that didn't have its goat?"

"There's something more to it 'n that," Smith retorted sharply.

Mills gave him a queer look, one in which curiosity intermingled. "Hm-m, you ain't so dumb!" he muttered.

"Thinkin' I was?" Smith's brows arched humorously, yet he did not lose his seriousness. Mills flashed him another odd look then took to contemplating his horse's ears.

"No-o," he said after a time. "Only the Carlink has been tryin' to get *your* number an' I was wonderin' if yuh'd noticed it."

Smith laughed shortly, a bit deprecatingly. "To use our hard-boiled ram's words he greeted me with when I arrived 'I'm not blind.' But yuh're talkin' in circles, old man. Supposin' yuh give it to me straight?"

MILLS grinned approvingly. "Something tells me something's goin' to break loose soon an' that I want to be present to see her strike. All right, ol' hoss, here she is, straight from the shoulder. This here Carlink is a stiff-necked outfit, if yuh savvy what I mean. Sort of lordin' it over the range—big outfit—the rest hereabouts is little fellers compared to 'em. Their critters number ten head to the little fellers' one. Old outfit, too. Back in yonder days they was sure poison to settlers. They ain't never out-growed it. Take it right today ol' Bull Turpin 'ud send 'em out a-gunnin' if he dared. But them times is past which they knows it. They're just toleratin' us through necessity an' makin' things just as miserable as they can. Take their present crew, Smithy. It's just like it uster was—sure enough cowboys but tough an' mean as the devil. They're ridin' hellions, if yuh ask me, an' respectin' no man's rights."

Smith nodded thoughtfully. "You've backed up the conclusions I'd already drawn. But what about Duffy? I still ain't clear concernin' him."

"Aw, that's a different story. There's hard feelin's there an' no mistake. Ol' Duffy was crazy to send his kid out with the Carlink wagons after what he done." Mills stopped abashed, a sudden change in his voluble manner. He seemed in doubt and at the same time indignant.

"Come, let's have it," said Smith sharply. "What did the old man do to rile the Carlink? It must have been murder or worse the way they treat his kid."

"They probably look at it as worse," Mills muttered, his manner plainly reluctant. "What did Duffy do? Nothin' short of puttin' a filin' on Smoky Gap that'll cut the Carlink off from a nice, sizable chunk of their best range when he's a mind to! An' he's been makin' talk to that effect even if ol' Turpin hadn't already suspected it. Then he sends the kid out with *their* wagon to learn the range end of the cow business! Can yuh imagine such a damn fool?"

"An' this gap?"

"There's a big basin with lots of natural shelter, an' Smoky Gap is its only entrance. Up there is where the Carlink has wintered their calves an' weak cows ever since the brand come into existence. Can yuh see how that knocks the Carlink into a cocked hat?"

"Plain as the nose on yore face," admitted Smith. "An' they're takin' their spite out on the kid!"

"You said it. He'll be lucky if he gets back home alive," Mills said feelingly.

"Something ought to be done about it," mused Smith, more to himself.

"Ye-ah. But who's goin' to do it? If yuh think we're approvin' of the treatment that kid's gettin', guess again," said Mills with unwonted savageness. "But we got better sense'n to buck that outfit."

"Guess I'll call for a hand," Smith said quietly. "I'm out of favor anyway"—he smiled grimly—"so I guess I can't make my position any more unpleasant an' maybe I can make 'em respect the rights of youth."

Mills was about to make some violent comment when he noted the bleak aspect of his companion's eyes and the purposeful set of his lean jaw. He was so impressed by the picture of dauntless spirit and rigid resolve that he swallowed his words unspoken. Again it occurred to him that this Jack Smith that had so far baffled them all was still an unknown

quantity. And it struck him with greater force that there was a big surprise in store for somebody. Hard as it was for him to restrain his tongue he did not speak again until Smith himself broke the silence that followed his declaration.

"What's their particular grudge against the J Six, Acorn? I suppose I inherit it from that source."

MILLS' lip curled unconsciously. He spoke, though, hesitantly, "Well, this Boyles—yore boss—he ain't no cowman—" The cowboy broke off and eyed Smith askance to see if he was taking offense. But Smith grinned and nodded gentle encouragement.

"I've heard he's an old, retired locomotive engineer," he chuckled. "I s'pose the extent of his knowledge of cattle is the long drags he pulled toward market. Go on."

"An' damn little good that experience has done him. Honest to God, Smithy, ol' Boyles has come close to disgracin' this range with the reps he's been sendin' out! I'll side with the Carlink there—damned if some of 'em wouldn't make poor sheepherders!"

"An' they're thinkin' I'm of the same breed?"

"We-ell, I reckon they been thinkin' so you sure opened their eyes. They ain't got yore equal when it comes to handlin' a lass-rope, an' as for ridin'—I reckon you'll qualify."

"Between you an' me, Acorn, I'm promisin' things is goin' to be different so far as the J Six is concerned, in the future," said Smith enigmatically. "Now is that all the Carlink has got against it?"

"All! Ain't that a-plenty? Ain't I been tellin' yuh what a high an' mighty outfit they hold themselves to be? I'm tellin' it to yuh straight, these past reps of Boyles was an insult to any self-respectin' outfit—an' the Carlink with all their prestige to uphold! But they made short shift of 'em, you bet. Run 'em off the outfit or made life so plumb miserable they was all-fired glad to quit. Nope, there ain't been a J Six stray-man yet they ain't put on the run."

Mills gave him a sidelong glance to learn the effect of his words but Smith appeared unperturbed. "An' you're surprised they haven't run me off?" Smith asked gently.

"No-o, not altogether. Although yuh've stayed the limit. Yuh're different from the others an' they savvy that. You still got 'em guessin'. However I'm lookin' for somethin' to break pretty sudden."

It broke that very noon. Some of those arriving early off of circle had already eaten and rode out to relieve the day-herders. Two others held up the forenoon's gather. The dusty, hungry circle riders sloped into camp with lusty yells. They had about finished bolting their dinner when the day-herders arrived. It was while these latter were at dinner that the foreman made a sudden and unexpected remark.

"If a man went tuh sleep on me when I was on day-herd," he growled, "he'd better start huntin' a hole sudden. He sure had, 'cause I'd take down my rope an' run him out of camp."

The measured ugliness of his tone attracted Smith's instant attention. He swept the circle of faces until his eyes came in contact with Kid Duffy's painful embarrassment. He had no need to look farther for the butt of Woods' remark. The youth's eyes were still bleary and heavy-lidded. Neither did Smith miss the look of appeal in them as they met his for a fleeting instant and then swept disconsolately on.

Again Smith swept the faces until his eyes came to rest on a man that he knew Duffy had been on day-herd with. This man's guilt was depicted in his exulting features. The intensity of Smith's regard drew the man's eyes to him. As he met those accusing, cold gray eyes his grin died and a dull red stole up into his features. Then his eyes wavered and fell.

"If there's anything more contemptible than a hombre who'd brow-beat a kid it's a snitcher," Smith said.

A silence had followed the foreman's words. A more significant silence now followed Smith's speech. Attention was divided between Smith and the cowboy who showed unmistakable embarrassment now. Interest quickened as they saw Smith set his plate carefully to one side and get to his feet. Eyes again centered upon the red faced rider, who looked up quickly and started to his feet with the J Six rep. But to their surprise as much as his, Smith ignored him after that one scathing glance and turned to the foreman instead.

"Woods," he said in a slightly con-

strained tone, "I'd like to get one of yore men to stand my trick at guard tonight. I've been on a week straight now an' I'd like to know what a night of undisturbed sleep feels like."

Woods looked his surprise. Then he laughed shortly. "He's whinin', boys," he sneered. "This here rep of the J Six's is a-belly-achin' already!" But his rough humor passed in a flash. He scowled up at Smith, meant to intimidate, and snarled, "Nothin' doin'. If yuh can't hold yore end up cut yore string an' get to hell out. No guard duty for the wagon-men—them's my rules."

BUT the refusal had the opposite effect on Smith from that expected. His face denoted satisfaction and triumph. "That's just what I wanted yuh to say, Woods!" he said in a hard voice, and turned quickly to the other riders. "Yuh heard what he said, boys—that it was again' his rules for a wagon-man to stand guard?"

Several of the reps nodded; all stared at him puzzled. Woods wondered, too, what he was driving at. But only for an instant. Smith turned and confronted Duffy. The youth was trembling visibly and gave Smith an apprehensive glance. But Smith quickly reassured him with a friendly smile and a kind word.

"It's all right, Duffy," he said gently, but in a tone distinct so the others might hear. "I aim to be yore friend. There's a question I want to ask yuh for yore own good. Are you drawin' wages from the Carlink?"

To Smith's utter surprise the boy shook his head. In a few words he explained he was out to gain experience, an arrangement made by his father. When Duffy had finished the foreman laughed gratingly.

"Was yuh thinkin' Smith, the Carlink would hire the likes of him? We're some particular an' not to be classed with the J Six!"

But Smith was again smiling, a hard, savage sort of smile. He ignored the foreman and resumed his questioning. "But yuh're workin' *for* the Carlink? Yuh're ridin' their horses an' doin' day-herd?" Duffy bowed his head to both queries. "You ain't representin' no brand?" This time the boy shook his head. "An' you been doin' night-guard pretty regular?"

"Every night since we started out—that's how I dropped off to sleep today!" Duffy answered with a sudden burst of spirit.

Smith faced the foreman, an ominous gleam in his gray eyes. "Maybe this is an oversight on yore part?" he asked with significant quiet.

But Woods was not in a mood to take the hint. "Naw," he snarled, "it ain't no oversight! I don't look on him as a wagon-man. Yuh heard him say he's out to learn—"

"On day-herd every day an' guard every night—if yuh're so plumb interested in his instruction why don't yuh change his menu, Woods? Put him out on circle or let him in at the workin's once in a while where he can learn something," said Smith with biting sarcasm. "Evidently yuh mean to teach him well—"

"Say, you tryin' to tell me how to run this outfit?" Woods jerked to his feet and strode forward, shaking with rage. Smith met him half way, quiet and grim.

"No, I'm not presuming so much, fellah, just tryin' to show the boys yore actions toward this chap is low-down mean. Woods, yuh're a damn coyote to treat a kid like this!"

Woods' features twisted horribly. The riders stared stunned at such recklessness. Controling himself with difficulty, the words falling thickly from his lips, the foreman growled, "What's yore particular int'rest in him?"

Smith knew the inevitable had come and met the issue with apparent disregard of consequences. "The interest of a friend, Woods," he answered crisply. "I'm always in sympathy with the under-dog. In this case I aim to see the kid gets a square deal."

"Oh, yuh do, hey?"

"I do. An' I'm handin' it to yuh straight that I'm takin' his part from now on. You can take that for what it's worth."

Then it happened. Used to bullying men and seeing them cow, Woods entirely lost his head now in the face of Smith's utterly fearless front. There was murder in his convulsive features as he launched forward, swinging his fist for Smith's face, snarling, "Take that, then!"

Had the blow landed there would have been a different story to tell. But an amazing thing happened. Smith was lighter than Woods by many pounds and much shorter in stature. As Woods

swung Smith seemed scarcely to move. But as the fist shot past his cheek, Smith whirled, caught the foreman's arm, and sent him hurtling to land with a crash a dozen feet away. Then before Woods could recover from the shock Smith was again upon him, bracing one foot against the foreman's neck and the other under the pit of his arm, the J Six rep pulled the arm straight out and started twisting the foreman's wrist.

The cowboys looked on in amazement. First they saw Woods' face twist with pain—then a bellow of agony came from his lips. Smith's lips were drawn into a malicious grin, seeming to derive considerable pleasure out of the torture he was giving the foreman. The wagon-men were still too dazed by the sudden happenings and too bewildered by the marvel of it all to do anything but stare.

But it finally percolated through their dazed senses that their foreman was getting the worst of it, and although, while that might please them under different circumstances, what he might have to say later at their non-interference caused them to start suddenly up. At this move the reps, too, woke up, and decided it was time to take a hand. They had never been anxious before to start anything with the Carlink, but seeing now the ease with which Smith had conquered Woods, the real wolf of the outfit, their spirits reacted accordingly. It might have ended in a free-for-all, had not Smith noticed these actions on the part of the wagon-men and jumped to his feet to meet them.

WITH a roar Woods was again on his feet and charging Smith, the arm Smith had been working on hanging limply by his side, but still full of fight. And again the miracle happened. Smith did not whirl, just crouched and caught the launched fist. For the second time Woods went hurtling through the air, this time to strike with a dull thud on his head and shoulders. And again Smith followed up his advantage, using a different tactic this time. As Woods started up a second time Smith launched himself at him bodily, entwining his legs about the foreman's half-raised body and crashing him back to earth. Woods roared and groaned, then gasped—and all sounds ceased as Smith tightened his hold with that beautiful flying body-scissors. Woods' face went purple, then gray. Smith relaxed his hold until the foreman once more commenced to breathe. After this demonstration the wagon-men lost their ambition, and what with seeing this new attitude of the other reps, decided to remain back as spectators.

Duffy alone among them was witnessing this action with some degree of comprehension. His eyes burned and sparkled. And while he did not fully realize the thing that was seeping into his mind for expression, he knew this exhibition of Smith's he was looking upon was not rough and tumble fighting but a science. Duffy was born and raised in a large eastern city where he had witnessed several like exhibitions.

In the meantime Smith held Woods in an absolutely helpless position as was proven by his fruitless efforts to free himself. Smith had again shifted his hold, his bent legs holding the foreman's arms as in a vise.

Smith was in perfectly good humor now. He grinned down at the foreman with tantalizing good cheer. "It's useless, Woods," he chuckled. "I've got yuh right where I want yuh. An' right like this is how yuh're goin' to stay till yuh see a little sense. Perfectly comfortable, ain't yuh? But yuh're as helpless as a hog-tied steer."

"I'll kill yuh when I get up!" snarled Woods. "I'll bust yuh wide open! Damn yuh, let me go!"

"Presently, presently," murmured Smith. "But first I want to lay down the conditions. Now listen sharp, Woods, so there'll be no misunderstandin'. Yuh're goin' to let the kid ride circle from now on. An' yuh're goin' to let him in at the workin's. In return he'll do his trick at night-guard in reg'lar turn as applies to myself—him an' me doin' our trick together from date. An' just one more point. There's enough reps here to give all two nights off a week an' the kid an' me is gettin' 'em from now on. Last, see that yuh give us both an even break with the rest in the future."

"I'll see yuh in hell first! I'll—"

"Yuh'll do as I say." Smith's teeth came together with an audible click. A yell of pain was wrenched from Woods' lips as Smith inserted his thumbs against the thick cords of the foreman's neck. "I can paralyze yore brain with just a bit more pressure, Woods. See—" A shriek from Woods this time. Smith greeted it

with a wicked smile. "Better think twice."

Woods twisted his head and moaned, something akin to terror appearing in his eyes. He mumbled something thickly that seemed to satisfy Smith, who sprang quickly to his feet, and after a triumphant glance around at the others, resumed his neglected meal. But not Woods. As soon as he was on his feet he turned his back on the bunch, and strode away to where the cavvy milled about the enclosure. A few minutes later he was seen riding away toward the morning's gather.

"Well, I'll be everlastin'ly damned!" ejaculated Mills, who had moved over to Smith's side. "Feller, you're sure a wonder!"

Smith paid him a humorous glance in which there was mixed a bit of grimness. "Not a wonder, Acorn," he drawled mysteriously. "It's every man to his own trade."

"Yuh're the livin' wonder of the ages!" declared Mills, without understanding Smith's allusion. "Why, you just naturally bumfoozled him!"

Smith frowned doubtfully. "I'm afraid it won't last, though. Hombres like Woods can't be convinced in one lesson. He'll be thinkin' it over an' then he'll make another stab. No, I reckon I'm not through with him yet—but I've won the first round." He raised his eyes to meet Duffy's worshipful ones, and gave the boy a friendly smile. The effect of that smile was instantaneous. Duffy seemed to grow perceptibly. His shoulders straightened with a jerk. With a quick movement he was on his feet and confronting his champion, thrusting out his hand. There was a strange smile playing about his lips as he contemplated his new found friend.

"I thank yuh for what yuh've done," he said with a simplicity that went straight to Smith's heart. "From now on I'm goin' to be a *man*. I ain't goin' to stand their raw-hidin' no more."

"That's the spirit!" approved Smith, gripping the hand hard.

"The lowly worm has turned," murmured Mills.

Then the boy bent forward and whispered in Smith's ear, "I know yuh now—I saw yuh in yore match with Rough-House Jack Lamar, the Chicago Terror! Oh, boy—"

"Sh-h!" warned Smith, quickly recovering from his surprise.

STRANGE to relate the clash between Smith and Woods had no effect upon the procedure of the roundup. It was carried on very much as before except now young Duffy was riding circle and taking part in working the herds. Under Smith's capable tutorship the boy was learning fast. These two were paired off on circle together as well as paired off on night-guard. This was as much through the boldness of Duffy as the machinations of Smith. He was no longer the meek, timorous scapegoat, but like a colt that has suddenly discovered new tricks that he was supposed not to be taught, he had taken the bit between his teeth.

The better acquainted Smith became with the boy the better he liked him. Duffy was quick to pick up things and never forgot what he was told. He had developed an insatiable appetite for information that caused Smith to smile at times, not alone about range and cattle, but of things that had no bearing on them. Duffy had a burning ambition that Smith did everything in his power to discourage.

"Forget it, Kid. I tell yuh I followed that game long enough to know there's nothin' to it. If yuh just want to learn it for what it c'n benefit yuh in yore every day life, that's all right. But don't ever follow it as a profession."

And so there the matter dropped except for mysterious excursions of evenings when Smith and Duffy rode back into the hills where the former taught the boy certain tricks that might be an aid to him to protect himself in the future. But when the time arrived the boy was given no opportunity to use his knowledge.

Smith had never been deceived by the Carlink's seeming acceptance of the situation. Nor was he misled by Woods' studied politeness. He knew their apparent surrender was meant to put him off his guard. He pretended to be while he was never more keenly alert.

But even he was not prepared for the haphazard manner in which it happened. It was never planned—just an impulsive action of two of the Carlink riders. But it brought about the desired results.

They had rounded up everything in that country lying between the head of Piney and the mouth of Twenty Mile Creek. Their next ground lay over in the Cow Creek country, a move of some

twenty miles before they struck unworked territory.

It was something of a vacation for the circle riders, riding ahead of the wagons in lively banter. Some had their ropes down, snagging brush and other objects, just to keep their hand in practice, or to get the green horses they rode accustomed to the swing and jerk of a rope.

In the lead of this playful coterie rode Smith and Duffy, engrossed in a discussion wherein even Smith forgot to keep an eye on the activities in their rear. Smith's horse pranced and tossed its head nervously, a cagey beast but half broke. Duffy's horse had the appearance of being gentle, plodding along stoically, heavy headed and sleepy eyed, but capable of waking up with startling suddenness. One of his eyes was a startling blue, the other black.

Duffy, unfamiliar with the type, complained he was lazy and a dead head. Smith corrected him, saying the horse was a jug-head and treacherous as the devil. It was only a minute later the animal proved Smith's claim. Noiselessly two of the Carlink men had drawn closer to the two in the lead, loops dragging. Without warning a loop whistled forward and settled about Duffy's body. The jug-head woke up sudden and violent. The rope whipped taut and the boy was jerked from the saddle.

SMITH caught the flash of a loop suspended over his own head. There was neither time to dodge or think of the consequences. Instinct told Smith the unstable character of the bronc he rode. As the loop dropped over his shoulders he whipped it down around the swell-fork of his saddle and back of the cantle, at the same time raking the panicky bronc with his spurs. With a startled snort the horse plunged forward, his flight was halted for an instant—then something snapped—a sharp yell of dismay—and the slack rope hit the bronc's heels. He was off with a rattle of hoofs and a squeal of fright, the bouncing jerking thing tied to him only increasing his terror.

After a two mile run Smith again had him under control. He looked back at the thing they had been dragging. The scuffed and damaged leather that had once been a prize saddle was scarcely recognizable. But Smith identified it after a time.

"Why, damn—that's Underwood's—the saddle he claims to have won at Pendleton in the buckin'!" Smith had visions of Underwood's consternation and dismay when he again got sight of it, and a gleeful sort of smile drew his lips. "Now ain't it a shame!" he murmured, and as proof of his hypocrisy, started his horse back on the high lope, choosing even a rougher route than had been theirs before. Over rocks, through brush and cactus—it was a sorry sight when he reined up before the bunch, removed the loop from his saddle, and dropped it to the ground without looking back.

Smothered comments greeted the relic at the rope's end. But Underwood was not capable of this much. His attitude was one of speechless horror. It caused Smith to look back, which look convinced him he had done a good job. He turned back in pretended surprise.

"Why, Underwood," he ejaculated, "yuh don't mean yuh tied hard an' fast under such circumstances?" But his dry humor instantly disappeared as he caught a low moan. He was out of his saddle in a flash and bending over a huddled form upon the ground.

"What is it, Kid? Are you hurt? Tell me what happensd!"

"Oh! O-o-oh!" groaned Duffy, writhing in agony. "I—I—think all—my bones is—broke! I hit in a pile—of rocks!"

"There ain't no bones broke," Mills assured Smith. "We went over him right careful. But he's bruised an' bunged up a-plenty!"

Smith came to his feet with a jerk, tossing his hat aside and removing his chaps. He straightened again after tearing off his spurs and faced the Carlink riders with hot eyes.

"All right, you Carling roughnecks, pile off! I'm a-goin' to give yuh a dose of yore own medicine! You hombres stay out of this," he addressed the reps as several started forward. "This is my party an' I'll do my own entertainin'."

As the Carlink riders hesitated, too surprised probably to realize that Smith was in deadly earnest. It was Underwood who finally woke up and started action, rage-blind and deaf to reason at the sight of his ruined prize. He charged with bellow of a mad bull, lunging forward with the same blindness. Smith's back was toward him—one of the reps yelled a warning—and followed a more amaz-

ing bit of action than they had witnessed before.

Smith ducked without turning, jerking his hands above his head as though for protection. But as the charging body struck him his hands gripped the cowboy's head and hurtled him over his shoulder and onto the hard earth with a body slam that ended Underwood's activities then and there. Yells of approval and admiration for his quick action changed to quick yells of disapproval as the other three Carlink men charged him concertedly. But the reps remembered his admonition not to interfere. And they soon saw that he was more than a match for them all. They could not see all the action that followed swiftly only that Smith met the attack on the flat of his back. The foremost was catapulted skyward as he met Smith's half raised legs that suddenly shot upward. As the body descended he caught the outflung hands so that the man struck with a thud on his back, having turned a complete flip-flop.

Meanwhile he had kept his feet engaged, entangling Woods' and sending him spinning a dozen feet away to end up with a backward upset. The third felt his neck gripped as in a vise by the legs Smith could do such peculiar things with, until a shriek of terror was wrenched from his lips.

THIS one-sided match, all in Smith's favor, continued for less than fifteen minutes, when, breathing hard and completely dazed by their inability to get at him, combined with sore and aching muscles they had contracted in contact with him, they gave up. He had tossed them about like so many nine-pins, effortlessly, without striking a blow—and he tipping the scales at less than any one of them! In the end they all lay upon the ground, exhausted, dumbfounded, too dazed and bewildered to care to continue the struggle. Smith sat to one side, hands clasped about his knees, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Duffy had forgotten his agony in his interest and was sitting up. The reps could say nothing, too flabbergasted. Mills alone seemed capable of breathless comment.

"My Gawd, he's cleaned up on the whole caboodle! He's whupped 'em!" the rep yelled.

"Want some more?" inquired the J Six rep sweetly.

"A-plenty's enough!" Underwood seemed to have forgotten his saddle.

Smith had only to look at the other two to receive their admission that they, too, were satisfied. "Guff has spoke my sentiments exactly," one said thickly. The other simply nodded.

Smith turned his attention last to the foreman. "How about you, Woods?"

Woods labored under some great emotion. His features twitched suspiciously. He swallowed hard several times. Then suddenly he let a roar out of him—a roar of mirth! His whole lank body shook with it and threatened to become convulsed. Even Smith stared at him in surprise.

Woods' mirth at last subsided, although he was still grinning and chuckling as he struggled to his feet. He approached Smith and held out his hand.

"J Six, you win! Yes, sir, yuh're a wonder; It's funny—damn funny if yuh ask me — you — *you* — twenty pounds lighter'n me—against four of us Carlinkers—*an' beatin' the whole bunch of us!* I don't know how yuh done it. I don't give a damn now—but anyone c'n do that I sure tie to! War is ended an' peace is declared henceforth—we're surrenderin' unconditionally. Damn yore tricky hide, anything about this outfit is yores for the askin'. Shake!"

Smith shook, grinning oddly, a critical gleam in his gray eyes. "I hoped I might jar a little sense into yore head," he murmured. "Under yore rough, tough ol' hide I been wonderin' if there wasn't a little gold. An' now about Duffy—"

"He goes on the Carlink payroll from this day!" boomed Woods. "Why, man, you've made a real cowhand out of that kid. As for the trouble that'll be comin' up b'tween his dad an' the Ol' Man why —let the two ol' savages settle it b'tween 'emselves. An' now maybe yuh'll tell me just who you are?"

"Why, I'm the J Six," drawled Smith, with an ingenious grin.

"Hey?"

"Fact. Bought Boyle out. The J Six is a cow outfit in the future an' I promise yuh there'll be no shame takin' on the rep from now on."

"Yeah!" chortled Duffy irrepressibly. "An' if yuh want to know what else he is I'll tell yuh—he's the Cowboy Wrestler, Jack Smith, that throwed the champeen, Rough-House Jack Lamar—I saw the fight!"

BAD MEDICINE

BY GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

They said Ace Purdy was bad medicine—but the medicine he made them take was their own kind.

Author of "Bat Jennison Tracks 'Em Down," "Bat Jennison, Trouble-Shooter," etc.

ACE PURDY snuggled down in his chair and surrendered himself to that feeling of bliss coming from a sense of well being both mental and physical. He had ridden far that day, and he found this warm corner of the saloon to his liking. For a time the noises in the room soother his ear with their murmur. So it was with a genuine sense of resentment that he heard the jangle of angry voices nearby. Slowly turning his head, he cocked a disapproving eye on the source of the disturbance.

A veritable patriarch, his white chin whiskers quivering with indignation, was addressing a trio of men in language characterized more by its forcefulness than by its polish.

"You double-bitted, mangy crooks," the ancient dubbed them. "You beat me out of my money, that's what you did. Two thousand dollars for that claim, and darn your lying souls, it ain't worth a picayune."

"Spur 'em more, grandpap," Purdy, emerging from his lethargy, encouraged the old man happily.

"Now looky here, whiskers," the larger of the three men said threateningly, "I've listened to about all the clatter out of you I'm going to. We sold you that claim fair and square, and your yelpin' because she's petered out now don't set well with me."

"Yessir, you blamed old fossil," another of the men chimed in righteously, "when you buy *any* claim, it's chancy business. Red an' Tod an' me had been getting dust out of it right along, and you saw us pan some out before you bought it. How'd we know it might fizzle on you?" he demanded virtuously. "Bottle up them yappings or I'll tie a knot in your neck."

"Yeh," the old man snarled, "the dust you were getting out didn't belong in that mine, I betcha. All I've been getting out since is a fine collection of boulders and such, which I ain't no use for exactly. Where you got that dust, you panned out for me before you sold me the claim, I don't know, but I've got my suspicions."

"Shut your trap!" the big man called Red snarled. "One more peep out of you an' I'll bust you in two."

"I'll say what I please," the old man told him boldly, though there were signs that his legs had already decided to retreat.

The big man drew back his fist, but before he could strike, a foot shot out and he found himself clawing wildly to maintain his balance. With an oath, he whipped around and scowled down at Purdy, who still lounged serenely in his chair, a vast air of innocence spread over his face.

"What do you mean, trying to trip me like that?" Red demanded harshly.

"Excuse me," Purdy begged humbly, "but the sight of any fighting always makes me just that nervous that my hands and feet fly around. And you know, mister, I just can't stop 'em."

"Don't let him get away with that, Red," urged Tod, he of the fishy eye and discolored nose. "Smear him over the floor for his damned impudence."

"I'm going to do just that little thing," Red growled and he stepped forward, great hands outstretched, fingers crimped like the talons of a bird of prey. But he stopped as if a stone wall had been thrust up suddenly before his face. Purdy still sprawled at ease in the chair, he still smiled, but somehow that smile was different, and the gleam that came out of the sleepy half-lidded eyes carried the warning that perhaps all was not just as it looked. Besides, he had in some magical fashion produced a small derringer which he nestled caressingly in his hand, a weapon difficult in accuracy but of praiseworthy effectiveness at short range.

The three men, flanked by the goggling ancient, stood mouths agape as Purdy, leisurely and regretfully got to his feet. He stowed the little persuader away in his sleeve, and then stood there surveying the three with a mocking smile.

"Three bold, badmen," he chuckled. "Three to one against grandad here, and you wasn't a bit afraid."

Then his tone changed abruptly.

"If you want to fight, fight me!"

THE three looked furtively about. Purdy was a stranger to them, yet there was something about the capable air with which he wore a couple of well worn Colt's, which warned them that this was a game that was not for them. Grumbling in undertones, the three presently slunk away and with many a backward glance at Purdy, they went out through the door and into the night.

"The devil," Purdy sighed his disappointment.

The old man stood there wondering at the manner of this man who, all unsolicited, had interposed and saved him from the unpleasant results of his just wrath. And he might puzzle a long time and still be none the wiser. Ace Purdy was one of the enigmas which the West, out of its brood of men wildly searching for sudden wealth and often beyond the restraint of established law, had produced. He was a young man, well set up, with pleasant black eyes and a subtle air that suggested refinement and good breeding. Some observant men had noticed that while his speech was usually rough and uncouth, that when in his cups he often lapsed into the purest English. None could call him an intimate friend, and yet he had befriended many. He feared nothing and apparently valued his life as little as he did his money which he scattered lavishly when in funds. He was fast and deadly with a

gun, and yet it was only the bully or professional killer who had reason to fear that skill.

The old man touched Purdy on the arm.

"Mister," he said sincerely, "I don't know why you took my row on your shoulders, but I'm sure grateful and no mistake. Them three men are as crooked as a dog's hind leg, but they're mean and ornery and what I'd have got if you hadn't been here would have been plenty."

"Shucks," Purdy laughed, "you had 'em bluffed to a standstill yourself. Besides, don't thank me. That's the first fun I've had all evening. It was just a trifle anyway."

"No it wasn't a trifle," the old man maintained, "and I won't forget it, or my name ain't Warren."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Warren," Purdy smiled. "My name's Ace Purdy. And now let's have a drink on the mutual introduction."

"I said my name's Warren, but it's Dave to my friends. Further, that drink's on me."

"All right, Dave, old-timer," Purdy nodded. "Let's drink."

When the drink had been consumed with the formalities consonant with the occasion, Purdy drew the old man aside.

"I'd like to hear more about this mine," he suggested, "and hear it where other people can't listen."

"And I'd like to tell you," the other assured him. "Come along to my cabin. I've got doodles of blankets and I'd feel honored if you'd put up with me while you stay in town."

"Anything to make you happy," Purdy grinned. "Cheer-up, is my middle name."

WHEN they were comfortably settled in the old man's cabin, Purdy reverted to the mine.

"Tell me about it," he proposed. "I may be wrong, but someway I scent a big rat in the meal barrel."

"I reckon you ain't far wrong," the other nodded gloomily, "but anyway here's the whole tale, and it ain't very pretty, and don't show me up with much sense, I reckon."

"Don't worry about that," Purdy said soothingly. "We're all short on sense under some conditions. Besides, maybe you wasn't as foolish as you now look to be. But go on."

"All right," Warren nodded. "The fact is I'm from Pennsylvania, a farmer all my life on rented property. By scrimping and saving, my wife and me got together two thousand dollars. We figgered on it and decided finally for me to come out to the mines and see what I could do. By increasing it some, we'd have enough to buy a place and be independent."

"How much would that take," Purdy interrupted practically.

"Say about five thousand," the old man answered. "Four thousand to buy eighty acres of land, the rest to stock it. And now," he added with a pathetic outspread of his toil seamed hands, "it's all lost, every penny."

"Never say die," Purdy advised cheerfully, "until they begin to shovel the clods in on top of your coffin. They ain't any more than dug your grave now. But tell me how they roped you in to buy this patch of sand and boulders."

"It happened like this," Warren explained. "I got here about two weeks ago, to find all the claims staked. Being green at the business, I put in a few days just wandering around watching the miners at work. Occasionally a man would advise me to buy a claim that was really turning out some gold, a thing that I finally figured would be proper. More than once I passed by where these three crooks was busy, and stopped to swap a word with them. They was always friendly and polite too, darn 'em!"

"Their kind know jelly when they see it," Purdy grinned.

"I was their jelly, all right," the old man admitted ruefully. "Spread on to the bread thick too."

"Remember," Purdy asserted confidently, "that it ain't been et yet. I've got a notion that the last bite will be yours."

"I'm sure glad you think so," Warren said doubtfully. "Personally I believe I've been chewed up and swallered completely. But I'll go on. Them three were mining a claim apiece, strung out tandem fashion with Red pecking away at the middle claim. One morning—he'd told me the night before to drop round—I watched him make a clean up that bulged my eyes out. While I was standing there gawking like a goose, the pardner above, Tod, came down. He was all fuzzed up about what he'd just uncovered and ordered Red to lease his claim and come up and help him. Well sir, they

got to jangling and the end of it was that Red sold out to me. And I've dug and picked and washed for a week, and there ain't no more gold in that claim than there's hair on the top of my head."

"They salted it," Purdy said, "just like you would a ham only in this case they used gold salt. It's an old trick, but men older in the mining game than you fall for it occasionally. Yet sometimes," he added mysteriously, "they overlook something."

"You mean," Warren puzzled, "that there may be gold in that claim?"

"I wouldn't be surprised a bit if you found some there," Purdy answered.

"I suppose," the old man said after a moment, "that you'll be moving on tomorrow."

"I had figgered to," Purdy admitted, "but it looks now like that business would keep me here for a few days. Any way I want to take a good look over your claim in the morning."

THE next morning Purdy and the old man were getting breakfast when there came a heavy rap on the door accompanied by the growling command.

"Open up, old man. We've got something to tell you."

As Warren hesitated, Purdy slipped behind the door.

"Stand so that I can peek through the crack," he whispered, "And don't worry for I'm backing you."

So encouraged the old man opened the door leisurely to find himself facing the scowling trio.

"Morning, crooks," he greeted them.

The one called Red stepped nearer.

"Don't you 'morning' us," he threatened. "And don't make any more noises like 'crooks' neither." He warmed to his work. "Why you darned old fool," he roared, "if you so much as *think* again to yourself even the things you bleated up at the saloon last night, we'll take you apart like cut feed. That's what we came by this morning to tell you. And," he added loftily, "we've done it. It's a warning that won't be repeated either. Last night, backed up by that young squirt, you got away with it, but now its different."

"But, Mr. Red," a mocking voice disagreed, "things are *just* as they were last night. The 'young squirt' is still backing the old man."

Quite leisurely, Purdy emerged from his concealment and quite as leisurely moved out to the front of the trio.

"Well, if it ain't my three salters," he grinned at the three. "Nice and neighborly, I call it, for you skunks to call so early in the morning on me and *my pardner,* Mr. Warren. Did I, or did I not hear some words a minute back that sounded like threats? Threats always annoy me, and without bragging, I might say that I'm not nice to fool with when I'm annoyed!"

"Damned if I don't believe it!" the one with the Herculian nose blurted out, and simultaneously the three backed away.

"Goodby, buzzards," Purdy called after them. "Come again when you can't stay so long."

From a respectable distance, the man Tod turned toward Purdy.

"You may be bad medicine," he said darkly, "but there are others—worse."

And the three moved with more haste than dignity toward their own cabin.

Purdy laughed heartily at their rapid change of front, then he turned to the old man.

"Of course, you understand," he explained, "that that pardner stuff was just throwed out for their consumption. I'm not putting it out for you. It was merely for the moral effect."

"I'd be mighty proud," the old man declared earnestly, "to take you in as a partner. But shucks! Partners in a salted mine ain't much of an offer."

"I will accept a part pardnership," Purdy told him, "my part being to wrassle off these three pirates while your part will be ladleing out the gold dust."

The old man looked at him queerly, wondering what was behind that last statement.

After breakfast they went down to look over the placer claim. Several prospect shafts had been sunk down through the rock filled soil to the bed rock, where gold was usually to be found. The prospect shafts varied in depth from five to seven or eight feet. The bed rock revealed in the bottoms of the shafts was of a reddish color. Purdy looked at them one after another.

"Bed rock's smooth as an egg," he remarked finally. "Never find gold under those conditions. If it was rough or pitted with pot holes, you'd find gold. Sometimes pot holes will hold a nest full

of nuggets. This claim can't all be prospected. Another hole might light right on top of a bonanza."

His optimism was irresistible and as they worked that day, half hopes began to drift across the old man's mind. Yet the first shaft when completed and its bottom layers carried to the creek and faithfully panned, yielded not a suspicion of color.

THAT evening after supper the two went down town and after wandering about for a time, at length entered the large saloon where the two had first met. The bar with its roistering crowd of men, the card tables surrounded with silent, intent players, the impassive dealers, the dance hall with its gaudy habituants was all an old story, yet it was one that bore an ever living fascination. The two strolled about till finally Purdy called Warren's attention to a group of men gathered together in a far corner of the saloon.

"There's our friends, Tod an' Red an' Nosey, talking right earnestly with another pelican. Take a look and see if you know him."

Warren looked and when he spoke it was with a quaver of fear in his tones.

"Slim Dorgan! Ace, I'll never forgive myself for getting you into this mess. That Dorgan's a killer. They are sure laying for you. Here," he whispered, "we can sneak out the back way. Come quick."

"Softly," Purdy chuckled. "Bad medicine, huh? Dave, you just toddle over there and sit tight. I'm about to have some fun."

"Fun!" Warren gasped. "But Ace, that Dorgan's a lightning gunman. You don't understand or—"

"Oh shucks, Dave," Purdy cut him off. "Don't make foolish remarks but just amble over there and watch."

With a sad shake of his head Warren obeyed. Now, with beating heart, he watched Dorgan swagger up to Purdy; Red, Tod and Nosey grinning expectantly behind. Nor was Warren the only man watching, for a tense silence had settled over the room.

"Young feller," Dorgan growled, "I hear that you've been buttin' in on things that don't no wise concern you. Bein' just a infant, it's plain you don't know no better, but I'll learn you! I'll learn you!"

"I'm afraid I'm not going to like you at all, Mr. Dorgan," Purdy said sadly. "'Tis evident you have the tastes of a buzzard, since you're with as choice a collection of carrion as it has ever been my luck to set eyes on. You better go before I find myself getting peevish."

"Why, you whelp," Dorgan snarled, and he dove for his gun.

But he never reached it. Purdy, with a motion none could be sure he followed, had flashed out his gun and fired two shots, blended almost as one. Dorgan slumped to the floor, a look of astonishment overclouding the mask of hatred that had mantled his hard face. Purdy turned to the three men who stood as if rooted to the floor.

"I guess," he said evenly, "that you jaspers will finally get the notion that Warren and I are to be left strictly alone."

They did not stay to hear more but with almost ludicrous haste the three fairly tumbled over themselves getting out of the bar room.

"My Gawd," Nosey gasped when they emerged into the darkness, "I don't never want to lay eyes on that bird again."

"Me neither," Red agreed emphatically. Then, as his mind reverted to the man lying stretched out on the saloon floor, he added callously, "But so far as Dorgan's concerned, I ain't sheddin' any tears. If there ever was a cold blooded killer, Dorgan was that bird."

"The solid truth," Tod chimed in. "Even at that, this shootin' has upset me so that I'm moving on to the cabin."

THE next morning Purdy and Warren again repaired to the unpromising claim and set to work digging another prospect shaft. On the claim abutting their's below, Red and Tod and Nosey were similarly engaged and while maintaining an outward air of disdain toward the troublesome Purdy, they stole many an uneasy glance in his direction. Purdy noted it and chuckled softly. However, along toward ten that morning, the three forgot Purdy utterly. A drive of a pick and they had flushed a pocket of surprising richness, a nest of gold dust cradling many golden nuggets. Out of their hole the three popped like rabbits from a warren letting out an assortment of yells that brought men running from all directions. Long

before evening they had cleaned up a good four thousand dollars.

"Why in hell couldn't that have been me?" Warren complained bitterly.

"Well," Purdy remarked blithely, "who knows what you may run onto? A little bird whispers 'don't give up the pick'. Also I'm strong for the doctrine that heaven helps them that helps themselves."

And now as they worked, Warren noticed that his partner had grown thoughtful and that at times he nodded comfortable agreement with an unexpressed idea. The old man however was vastly discouraged and with their prospect shaft still a good foot short of the bed rock, he crawled out of the hole without protest, when Purdy suggested that they quit for the night.

Purdy went down town alone, his announced purpose the purchase of some tobacco. Within an hour he was back.

"Our three friends are tanking up big," he announced as he dexterously ringed a wall peg with his tossed hat. "Didn't want to interfere with them so I toddled back. Getting drunk," he added with a chuckle, "is a good thing for some fellers at some times."

"You're too deep for me," Warren puzzled. "I get a hazy notion there's something back of your remark, but that's all I do get."

"The best thing," Purdy suggested, "is for you to forget what I said. Besides that, let's go to bed."

Purdy listened while the old man's initial gurglings wove themselves finally into rhythmic notes. That snore had been hard to bear formerly but now the wakeful Purdy welcomed it as proof positive that his companion was solidly asleep. With this proof drumming on his ears, Purdy slid out of bed and boots in hand, tiptoed out of the room. On the doorstep he paused long enough to draw the boots on, then he stepped briskly away as if duty called him. Three hours later he was back at the door where he removed his boots and entered as silently as he had withdrawn.

Red and his two companions were in a fuzzy state of mind when they awoke late the following morning. Incidents of the big night before returned in hazy fragments, for they had been very drunk. Nosey pawed the straggling hair out of his red rimmed eyes and looking about, caught horrified sight of three empty gold pokes piled neatly together on their greasy table. He let out a wild yip.

"We've been robbed," he shrieked. "Look at them empty pokes!" And he pointed a dramatic finger toward the despoiled sacks flattened out on the table top. There was no doubt about it, nor any likely clue to the culprit.

"It all comes," Tod philosophied bitterly, "of all three of us gettin' drunk simultaneous. And as to who done it, there's a hundred men in the damned camp equal to the job."

Red had fumbled his way meanwhile to a corner, and lifting away a rude cupboard made investigation of the earth beneath.

"Well anyway," he reported, "they didn't get our cache. And there's a solid nine thousand left yet. Not," he added regretfully, "but that nigh four thousand dollars is high pay for just one drunk. But we got tanked and loses. Let's don't cry out loud. It's bad enough to be a damned fool without calling the whole camp as witness to that fact."

"I reckon that's the sense of it," Nosey admitted, "but I'd sure like to rip hell out the jasper who done it."

"So would I," Red agreed, "but we're not likely to have the pleasure. We'll just hafta charge it up to damn foolishness and not repeat."

They were strong, virile men and by the time they had soaked their heads in cold water and downed a heavy breakfast, small effects of their night's dissipation were visible. Besides there was the lure of the mine to woo their thoughts away from their loss.

WARREN and Purdy wandered down to the bank of the creek and looked over their sterile claim. The old man was discouraged and apathetic while Purdy, by way of contrast, seemed bubbling full of hope and ambition. Squinting down into the unfinished prospect hole, he surprised his companion by saying briskly,

"Dave, we won't finish that hole now."

"Why?" Warren queried. "Looks foolish when we are within a foot of bed rock not to complete it."

"Moves, if smart ain't never foolish," Purdy asserted didactically. "But the fact is that all the prospecting on your claim has been done along the middle.

Let's try sinking a hole at the one end. Maybe we'll hit it rich."

Warren did not combat the idea. The truth was that he was so sure that any prospecting was utterly fruitless that offering objections seemed wasted breath. So now taking their tools they moved to the extreme lower end of the claim and set to work. Before sundown they had finished it but for all their pannings they could not find a speck of gold dust.

"Gold ain't here," Warren said dejectedly. "Don't make no difference where we dig, it's no use."

"Never give up is my motto," Purdy said cheerfully. "Why I know a feller once on Stump Crick who—" and he entered on a mythical narration of pertinacity reaping a just reward that would have convinced the most seasoned pessimist.

"Tomorrow," he added, "we'll drill into the other end of that stubborn claim. Some place we're going to hit pay dirt."

They returned to their task the following morning and under Purdy's urge they tried the other extreme of the claim. By four o'clock they had tapped the under bed rock stratum but with absolutely negative results, proven beyond a doubt, yet Purdy held to his confident mien. Standing at the mouth of this worthless hole, he looked over the claim, then at the declining sun.

"We've got time," he declared presently, "to finish that hole we started two days ago. Who knows but what the bonanza lies there under less than a foot of gravel? She's worth a try."

The old man doubted, and stated his doubt with vigor.

"This darned claim's nothing but a fooler," he grumbled. "If there's any gold here it's been carried in."

"That might be so too," Purdy nodded innocently. "Bound to be in fact, since all gold is carried here one way or another. Come on and let's pick and shovel and act just like miners."

The old man clambered wearily down into the hole, sunk his pick in the rubble in a lethargic way, and levered up. But the sight that met his eyes instantly transformed him into a near maniac.

"Nuggets!" he shrilled out. "A nest of 'em! See, Ace!"

"Whoop!" Purdy chimed in as he dived at the mass and began clawing wildly. Then he shunted round on his knees to grin at the old man who was kneeling beside him, his face working spasmodically while big white tears of joy were making trails in the dusty mantling and dripping from his mustache.

"Didn't I tell you?" Purdy demanded. "Didn't I call the turn?"

"Sure did," Warren cackled hoarsely, "but I couldn't believe it."

Shoveling the gravel and sand into a flour sack, Purdy carried it down to the creek, dumped it out and leaving the old man to pan it, he galloped back for another load. This for an hour and the pocket, an irregular hole in the bed rock, had been bereft of its golden hoard. Purdy appraised their total with a practical eye.

"Considerable over three thousand dollars," he announced his calculation. "Let's lug it back to the hole and talk a bit."

THEIR feverish comings and goings had been observed by Red and his two companions working on the claim below, and now as Warren and Purdy started back to their prospect shaft, the three were watching them with eager eyes. Purdy noted it with secret elation nor did he fail to observe that the three were now approaching. Down in the bottom of the hole he dallied about until he felt certain that the trio were within ear shot. Then he raised his voice.

"And all the time," he said accusingly, "you and me have been holding them three honest men as crooks. I'm sure going to hunt them up even before supper and apologize for our wrong thoughts."

"Me too," Warren chimed in contritely. "They are as square as you and me."

"You betcha," Purdy added a crescendo of new-born faith in the three, listening, as he expected just out of sight. "And they'd drop lead if they knowed what a bonanza they sold you for two thousand dollars. Here we take out over three thousand this last hour and other pockets nested under that wall of gravel not yet tapped. Ten thousand at the lowest guess I'd put it, and more likely a half more." He paused and fixing the old man with his sharp eye, winked portentously, a warning to follow the verbal lead to a finish. Now he talked on, his tone surcharged as with poignant regret.

"And if it hadn't been for that darned letter you got today," he fabricated to

the old man's astonishment, "you could set right here and riffle the swag. But as it is, you've got to hit the stage tonight."

The old man's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment.

"Yep that letter," he repeated hazily, "sure—"

"Sure did raise hell," Purdy took up the burden. "That Wilks needs killing starting that suit when he did, but it's started notwithstanding. You've got to be there to fight it."

"I suppose so," Warren nodded feebly.

"No suppose about it," Purdy prompted his dazed friend. "Tonight at midnight you're stepping onto that stage."

Warren viewed the young fellow as through a thick mist. Dumbly he shook his head, his numbed mind groping with the notion that Purdy had gone suddenly insane. However, Purdy gave him little time to even cuddle his straying idea.

"Now as to your mine," he went on briskly, "there's one of two things to do. I can stay and work it, which I don't want to do at all but will, if it comes to that. The other thing is to sell it. We'll toddle up town with this stuff and sell to the highest bidder and the price will be high. Don't you worry about that."

Warren almost on the verge of a mental collapse, heard this cool proposition and caught again that significant and sustained wink. There was more here than he knew, that was patent. He pulled his wandering faculties together with an effort.

"I reckon that's the sense on the situation," he admitted hollowly. "Let's go."

"In a minute," Purdy answered, and seizing the shovel he hastily covered the pocket from which the gold had been taken, tossed their tools up over the edge, and climbed out. He straightened up and nodded in friendly way toward Red and his friends who were standing a few yards away looking rather sheepish.

Purdy strode up to them and held out his hands.

"The drinks are on me, boys," he announced, "and that carries with it a ton of apologies. Yet you've got to admit that things looked bad. But as they stack up now, you bet Mr. Warren is grateful enough to black your boots."

"That's all right," Red grinned broadly. "Everybody makes mistakes."

Then his avid eye caressed the poke of dust which Purdy did not bother to hide.

"You must have made a whacking strike."

"Well, if close to four thousand dollars in dust and nuggets dug out in an hour is hitting it right, we sure did. And now we've got to roll our freight up town," Purdy said. "Mr. Warren is topping the stage tonight. Just got to, and he's going to sell out if he can."

WARREN, still in a daze at Purdy's rushing ways with another man's property, nodded dull confirmation. The play was a mile over his head.

"Maybe," Nosey put in craftily, "Mr. Warren won't have to go that far to find a buyer."

Purdy looked about as if to discover such an animal, then turned to the three.

"Oh," he laughed with the joy of a blinding discovery, "you mean that you men might buy it? Say," he declared with enthusiasm, "that would be neat! You sell it to Mr. Warren and then you buy it back."

With the lure of bargaining upon them, the trio grew cunningly reticent.

"We might," Tod admitted, "if the price was right."

In answer, Purdy untied the string from the poke and allowed the mouth to gape wide.

"Look that in the eye," he declared blithely.

They did and the sight made their mouths fairly water with desire.

"We'll give three thousand dollars," Red announced after a brief consultation with his companions.

"So would my Aunt Jezebel," Purdy laughed scornfully, "only she's dead. Six is what me and Mr. Warren set as our price."

"Six," Warren repeated dutifully.

Followed a second consultation between the three, which eventuated in an offer of five thousand. Now Purdy and Warren withdrew for a supposed conference, which in real truth was a monologue with Purdy as orator, for to Warren's first refusal, Purdy hissed, "It's a darned sight more than it's worth as I'll write to you some time. We're going to take it."

Five minutes of mouthing over meaningless words, and Purdy and Warren returned.

"Mr. Warren'll take it," Purdy announced, "if you'll hurry. We'll be at Grigg's store in twenty minutes. If you don't show up inside ten minutes after that we'll be gone."

The two parties separated, but within the allotted time they met at the designated store. Weighing out the gold dust, and signing a bill of sale required but a brief time, and in the gathering dusk Purdy and Warren set out briskly for their cabin.

Warren presently broke a considerable silence.

"I reckon I'm a fool to do as you said," he asserted a little belligerently.

"Mr. Warren," Purdy disagreed, "you're the smartest man in this camp at this present minute. You told me that five thousand dollars would fix you and your wife up bully and you've got well above eight. As to the mine, maybe you'd hit another strike, and maybe not."

"That's so, of course," the old man admitted freely, "but anyway a part of this is yours, and that goes."

"Not a chance in the world," Purdy declined the offer with vigor. "I've had my pay in fun and now don't ask any more questions, which I see you're bubbling over to do. We want to be ready when the stage leaves. I'm going with you," he added, carelessly. "Sold my pony a day ago just so I could."

While the old man was busy that night packing up a few odds and ends, Purdy, unobserved, managed to write a short note, and leaving the cabin on some flimsy excuse, was gone a few minutes. And he was humming a tune of doubtful melody and more doubtful sentiment when he returned. Midnight saw them settled in the stage headed toward the east.

AS SOON as it was light enough to work, Red and his companions were at their mine. When they reached the edge of the prospect hole that had yielded the phenomenal strike, Tod made observation that a part of the top had slid down into the hole partially blocking the bottom. There was nothing out of the ordinary in this, so taking a shovel he clambered down to toss out the debris. A half dozen heaves and his shovel came in contact with a baking powder can which had been concealed under the slide. With something more than curiosity, he dug it out, and carried it up to his comrades. Red, with fingers that trembled, clawed it open and silently picked out a grimy bit of paper nesting in the bottom. Deciphered, it ran as follows:

"To the Honorable, Red, Tod and Nosey: This claim having been twice salted should keep now for quite a while. Much obliged for the 'loan' of your gold for the second salting.

Ace Purdy."

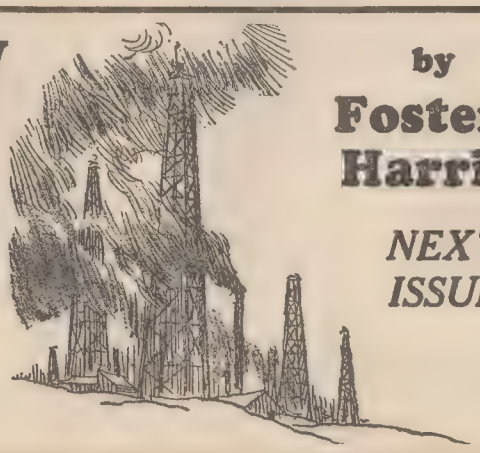
"Why the crooked son-of-a-gun!" Tod gasped. "Actually stole our own gold, planted it here, and dug it out again so we'd buy this damned no account piece of ground."

"By cripes," Red cut in angrily, "I'm going after old Warren right now, and I'll be back with the whole works. Watch me!"

"No you won't," Nosey said sadly, "No you won't. You're forgetting that Purdy went with him."

POISON POOL

a novelette of oil-town gangsters



by Foster-Harris

NEXT ISSUE

GUN JUSTICE

Part II

Melody said he was lucky. But when two of Du Sang's gunmen lay down a murderous ambush Melody needs a heap more than luck!

IF YOU MISSED THE FIRST PART, BEGIN HERE

WHEN that likable red-head, Melody Madigan, hit the little town of Vaca Wells he picked THE HERE'S A GO SALOON as the best place in town and went in. Pee-Wee Page, the owner and the fattest man in the Southwest, was behind the bar. In front was a swarthy gunman whom Pee-Wee introduced to the newcomer as Manitoba.

Manitoba seemed over curious about Melody. Melody kidded him along in his good-natured way. Manitoba gave up at last, when he saw the look in Melody's eyes.

"Aw, shucks," Manitoba muttered uneasily, "you got me wrong."

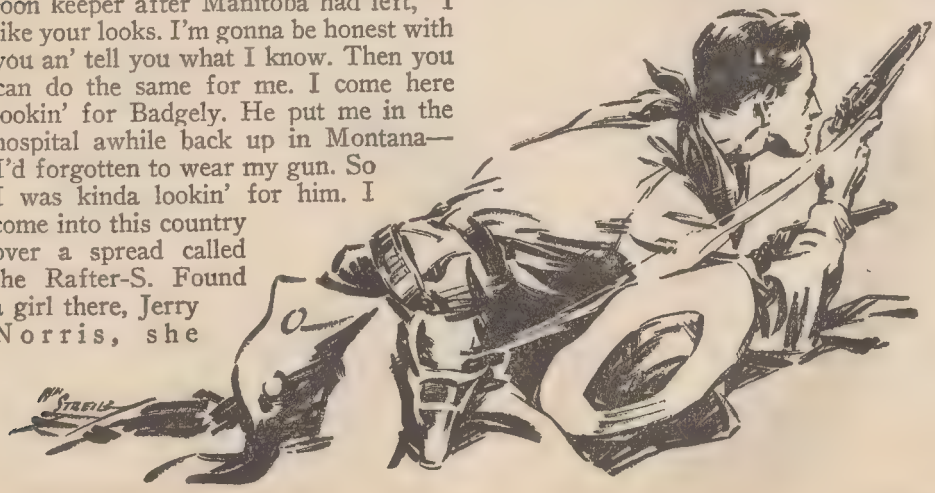
"No I ain't," Melody snapped, showing his real feelings for the first time. "I know you and your friend Bull Badgely. You're the guys who go around fightin' a gal an' a man with a broken leg. You can tell Badgely I'm in town lookin' for him."

There was a menacing growl in the last words. Manitoba, glad to get away, went out to hunt up Badgely.

"Pee-wee," Melody said to the big saloon keeper after Manitoba had left, "I like your looks. I'm gonna be honest with you an' tell you what I know. Then you can do the same for me. I come here lookin' for Badgely. He put me in the hospital awhile back up in Montana—I'd forgotten to wear my gun. So I was kinda lookin' for him. I come into this country over a spread called the Rafter-S. Found a girl there, Jerry Norris, she said her name was, an' her daddy, Tom Norris, throwin' some lead at a couple of hombres she said was Badgely an' Manitoba. Them two was already on the run when I got there, but the girl had lost her horse an' I lent her mine. She didn't seem to like me very much an' was sorta mysterious about the whole business. But Pee-Wee, that girl's head is red, kinda like mine, so I'm buyin' chips in the game. What's the lay?"

Pee-Wee cleared his throat and looked around him nervously. Only Jug-Handle, a bum who had drifted in a week or so before and gone to work for Pee-Wee, was in sight. He was apparently asleep in the corner.

"So help me," said Pee-Wee, "it'll be the death of me. They'll get me for not mindin' my own business. But it's time something was done about Tom Norris an' if you're man enough to take a hand, by gosh, I'll back you! It's them Du Sangs. Three brothers. Hugo, he's chief, but his brothers, Guy and Luke, is just as bad. Manitoba and Bull Badgely both work for the Du Sangs an' there are some other specimens just like them two out on their ranch, the Diamond-8. It's this way, there's been an' awful lot of rustlin' round here last few years. An'



by William Colt MacDonald

Author of some of the best Western yarns ever told!

it's been hittin' Tom Norris and his Rafter-S worse than anybody. He's broke. An' the Du Sangs want to buy his ranch. But Norris just about told 'em to go to hell. Since then the Du Sangs has been using strong arm methods. They're tryin' to starve Norris out. The store here in town won't sell Tom nor the girl a thing. That's the lay out."

"An' the other ranchers won't do a thing?" Melody asked in surprise.

"Well, the other fellows is pretty far away," Pee-Wee explained. "There was a couple of detectives in here, though. One disappeared. The other shot himself—or that is what the sheriff said. Sheriff's a Du Sang man too."

"Who do you figger is the rustler?" Melody pursued.

Pee-Wee cleared his throat. He was white as death. When he answered, his voice was hoarse. "Du Sang," he said. "Who else?"

"I thought," said Melody. And Jug-Handle, pretending to be asleep had heard every word.

The front door flew open. In the doorway stood Bull Badgely, a six-gun in each hand and each gun trained on Melody.

"Want me, eh, Madigan?" Bull snarled. "Well, here I am, come to finish what I started last year." And he thumbed back the hammers of his guns.

Chapter VII

FLAMING LEAD

THE customers of the Here's a Go elevated their arms in the air and commenced to move away from the bar. Pee-Wee Page had gone white. Melody was standing like a statue graven from living marble, his gaze riveted on Bull Badgely. Badgely's fingers were quivering on triggers, evil lights of savage triumph glittering in his blood-shot eyes.

"Draw, damn you, draw!" Badgely snarled a second time. "Go for your iron! I won't shoot until you've touched gun-butts. They said if I got you once, I could do it a second time. I will, too!" His lips curled back, exposing tobacco-stained fangs in a murderous grin. "Skeered, eh? Skeered to draw with Bull Badgely. Well, I'll plug you, anyhow, you——"

Melody had suddenly thrown himself sideways, left hand darting to holster. Even then, Badgely fired, but the cowboy was moving too fast to provide a good target. Melody's gun streaked out, up, stopped abruptly in a burst of smoke and flame!

As he struck the floor, Melody released another spurt of flaming lead. Lances of orange fire had been crashing from Badgely's guns, but his bullets were striking only the back wall of the saloon. An expression of shocked surprise spread over his features. Then his body sagged. The hands holding the guns waved wildly a moment, before the weapons dropped from his fingers, their owner crumpling face-down on top of them. A shudder ran through his form, then he lay still!

Melody punched out the empty shells,

replaced them with cartridges from his belts, blew the curling smoke from the muzzle of his forty-five, and arose from the floor.

"Gawd! That was fast!" one of the customers exclaimed, something of awe in his face. Everyone commenced talking at once. The smoke drifted through the open doorway. "I swear you'll be the death of me, yet, Melody," Pee-Wee gasped. "I can't stand no more shocks of this kind."

Melody's face was grim as he glanced down at the silent figure. "That's one of the things I sorta counted on doin' when I come down here," he said slowly, "but I didn't expect it would happen so soon." He paused a moment, frowning, then, "There's somethin' back of this. I know Bull Badgely. He wouldn't start things 'thout he had backin' of some kind. Wonder where that Manitoba hombre is?"

He moved rapidly across the floor, taking up a position just inside the doorway, and to one side. His gun swung in a swift arc that covered the room. "Not a word from any of you. Somebody else may be honin' for trouble. I crave to see 'em first."

The sounds of footsteps were heard outside. Du Sang entered, followed by Manitoba. Du Sang's jaw dropped as he noticed the dead man on the floor. He glanced quickly over the assembled men, eyes searching for Madigan. Both he and Manitoba had passed within a few yards of Melody when they entered, and now stood with their backs to him.

"Which one of you fellers done this?" Du Sang demanded in ugly tones. "By Gawd, I'll have—"

"He ain't here, Hugo," Manitoba put in, "he must'a' ducked—"

"It was Badgely's own fault," Pee-Wee was explaining heavily, at the same time. "He come here—"

"I don't care who done it!" Du Sang thundered. "The feller that plugged my foreman has gotta face me—"

He paused abruptly, noticing that the eyes of the customers kept straying to a point behind him. Du Sang whirled suddenly, one gun half out of holster. His hands shot into the air, as he saw Melody.

"Take it easy, mister," came Melody's cold tones. "Put that gun away pronto, Manitoba!"

The two men backed slowly away from the gun covering them, Melody following step by step. He moved slightly to the center of the room, alert for the first suspicious action.

"By Gosh, feller, I'll—" Du Sang commenced.

"You'll back up to that bar, that's what you'll do." Melody's words were close-clipped. "You an' Manitoba—up close, where Pee-Wee can reach your guns."

DU SANG'S face flamed with impotent rage. His arms came down an inch, then quickly stretched to full length again, as Melody tilted his gun-barrel.

Melody continued, "Pee-Wee, get them guns and empty 'em. Make it snappy. They can have their smoke-wagons back, when you're through."

"Touch my guns an' it's your finish, Pee-Wee," Du Sang threatened.

"Aw, hell, Hugo," Pee-Wee protested. "Show some sense. I'm bein' gunned into this, just like you."

"Go ahead, Pee-Wee," Melody said. "You're under my protection so long as you do what I tell you to do."

Pee-Wee puffed and panted, but managed to reach his bulk across the bar. "Hell of a job to give a fat man," he grumbled. Finally, he secured the four guns, emptied the cylinders, then replaced the weapons in their owners' holsters.

"An' don't reload until you've pulled outta here," Melody said to Manitoba and Du Sang. "You can leave anytime you like. If you come back, you better come shootin'. That's all."

Du Sang forced a smile. "I ain't leavin' yet," he said, deciding to make the best of his situation. "I want to talk to the man that done somethin' nobody else ever done—got the drop on Hugo Du Sang. You're Madigan, I'm thinkin'."

"T'ain't necessary that you should think," Melody replied coldly. "You know damn' well Manitoba told you who I was."

"Du Sang had no reply for that statement.

"Jug-Handle, hey, Jug-Handle!" Pee-Wee bellowed suddenly. "Where in the name of the seven bald steers has that hobo gone to? He was here until the shootin' started."

At that moment the tramp intruded a cautious head through the doorway at

the rear of the saloon. "What you want, Pee-Wee?"

"Get that carcass off'n my floor and take it to the undertaker's," was the answer, "unless—" Pee-Wee paused at a new thought and spoke to Du Sang, "Badgely was one of your outfit. What do you want done with the remains, as the paper calls 'em?"

"I don't want that body," Du Sang growled. "The undertaker's suits me. Let the county pay for buryin' the fool."

One of the customers volunteered to help, and he and Jug-Handle departed to the street with Badgely's body. A crowd attracted by the shooting, had gathered in front of the saloon, but after Jug-Handle's explanation of the killing it quickly dispersed.

Melody holstered his gun and turned to Du Sang, "You said you wanted to talk to me. What's on your mind?"

Du Sang was anxious to appear friendly, now. "Have a drink?" he invited, and at Melody's refusal, "No? All right. What I want to know is why you rubbed out my foreman, and then stuck up me'n Manitoba?"

"That's easy," Melody replied. "I was just payin' Bull back for somethin' he handed me one time. He got the breaks before. I got 'em this time. There can't be no charge of murder lodged against me, 'cause everybody in here saw Bull's guns out, before I'd touched mine. On top of that he told me to draw. So I done it. Knowin' Bull, I kinda figured he'd have friends near. That's why I covered you, until everybody had had a chance to cool down. That's all there is to it."

"But I don't understand," Du Sang frowned. "If he had his guns out, how did you beat him to the shot?"

Melody grinned. "Pure luck. I couldn't do it again in a hundred years. As a matter of fact, I ain't no gun-artist, a-tall."

DU SANG was puzzled. "I note you pack two smoke-rods," he continued. "That ain't done usually, unless a feller is a killer or a law-officer."

"You're packin' two yourself," Melody pointed out. "So's Manitoba. Badgely did, too."

"That don't mean nothin'," from Du Sang. "We just carry two, 'cause they balance a feller's weight better."

"I carry two 'cause I want to," Melody retorted. "Any further questions?"

"You a cattle dick?" Du Sang shot at him.

Again Melody laughed. "Good Lord! If this ain't the most inquisitive town I ever see. Well, if I was one of these here deteckative hombres I wouldn't tell you anyway, so what difference does it make?"

"A lot," Du Sang answered. "Regardless of what's been said and done, I'm offerin' you a job on the Diamond-8. Good pay, too."

Melody shook his head. "You don't talk my language, Du Sang. I'm already hired to the Rafter-S."

Du Sang started. "Rafter-S!" he exclaimed. "Hell! You're just wastin' time. Norris ain't got no money for wages—"

"There's a reason for that, too," Melody said evenly. "A reason I figure to look into. To tell the truth, Norris don't know yet that I'm workin' for him, but he will tonight."

"Don't know you're workin' for him?" Du Sang was losing the drift of the conversation now.

Melody suddenly dropped his easy attitude. "Look here, Du Sang," he said sternly, "you'n me might just as well get ourselves on our correct ranges right now. Norris has got a fight on his hands, and it don't look like he's gettin' his rights."

"Why don't he appeal to the law then?" Du Sang sneered.

"From what I understand of law around here," Melody replied, "I don't think Norris has got a coyote's chance of gettin' any legal justice. I always did like an underdog scrap, so I'm goin' to see if I can't help him get some gun justice. In other words, I'm out to help him down certain skunks."

"Meanin' who?" Du Sang's tones were ugly.

"Meanin'," Melody stated flatly, "the lousy buzzards that are preventin' him from gettin' food, the thievin' skunks that's running' off his cattle, the yellow snakes that will shoot a girl's hawss and then run when her father throws down on 'em. Is that clear?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Madigan."

"That's whatever. Manitoba knows, anyhow. He's workin' for you. Tonight, I figure to take supplies to the Rafter-S. Does *that* mean anythin' to you?"

"Not a thing to me, personal," Du

Sang answered, "but I happen to know that Norris ain't popular around here. It wouldn't surprise me in the least, Madigan, if you never reached the Rafter-S. You better be sensible and take a job with me—"

Melody smiled thinly. "I happen to recognize a threat when I see one, Du Sang. In case I shouldn't reach the Rafter-S, I'm callin' on Pee-Wee, and every other man here, to remember what you've said. Law ain't quite dead, Du Sang, but you will be, unless you change your ways a heap."

Du Sang's face flamed with anger. "You accusin' me of pickin' on Norris?" he growled.

"Yeah, I am," Melody snapped. "I'm just sorry I ain't got proof, or we'd settle things here and now. Unless you and Manitoba got somethin' further to say, Du Sang, you might as well be driftin'. I'm through talkin' to you."

"But I'm not through with you by a damn sight!" Du Sang roared angrily. "Just remember that."

He turned and flung himself through the doorway. Manitoba hesitated just a minute, a sneering smile on his lips. "Your one best bet, Madigan," he said, "is to take that job Hugo offered. Otherwise your life won't be worth a hoot in hell."

Melody smiled. "Manitoba," he drawled softly, "if that's warnin', I'm not needin' it. If it's a threat, what say we settle things, now?"

"It was a warnin'—nothin' else," Manitoba said hastily.

"I ain't needin' it—nor your presence, neither," Melody shot back at him. "Hit the dirt, feller."

Manitoba backed slowly toward the door. It wasn't until Melody had again taken his place at the bar that the man turned and moved swiftly to the street.

Outside, Manitoba found Du Sang waiting for him. The two talked in low tones for a few minutes, then started toward the Silver Spur Saloon. "So this Madigan hombre figures to take supplies through to the Rafter-S, eh?" Du Sang growled, as the men walked rapidly along the street. "Hell! He don't know what it means to buck Hugo Du Sang. C'mon, we'll tell Hump and Gus Randle what's happened. Then the four of us will make some medicine that'll stop Madigan plenty pronto!"

Chapter VIII

MELODY BUYS SUPPLIES

THE excitement in the Here's A Go quickly subsided, and the customers departed in search of their suppers. Jug-Handle hadn't returned from the undertaker's, and Melody and Pee-Wee were alone.

Pee-Wee sighed deeply, as the last patron made his way to the street. He looked with some concern at Melody, then turned to his till behind the bar and removed some money. From his pockets he produced several gold-pieces and bills. These he laid on the bar. "This here will buy some flowers for the funeral," he announced dismally. "They's about two hundred bucks there, but it's all I can spare at present, Melody."

"Who's funeral you oratin' about?" Melody queried.

"The funeral of the red-headed hombre that talked so rash like to Hugo Du Sang. Howsomever, if you don't want to take that money for flowers, use it as you think best to help the Rafter-S—"

"Hey, I don't need any money. I got some—"

"What you made peelin' a few broncs on the way down here from Montany, eh? That ain't much. You take that money, Melody. I'm glad to donate that much to the cause. 'Bout time I come alive and acted like a man, when there's a man's work to be done. Take it, dang you! I'll have more when that's gone."

"Mebbe you're right at that, Pee-Wee," Melody said. "I am li'ble to require more cash than I got in my jeans. Much 'bliged." He took the money, counted it and put it away in his pockets. "Well, I reckon I'll drift out and get some chow."

"Either the Paris Cafe, or the Mex Chili joint can put on a fair feed," Pee-Wee suggested.

"Them places close by?"

"Fairly. The Mex joint is east from here, across the street from the Silver Spur Saloon. The Paris is t'other way down the street, right next to Toby Harris' Gents' Clothin' Store. You can't miss it. But don't be takin' no shots at Toby's advertisement. You might get a pantsfull of scatter shot—"

"Advertisement?"

Pee-Wee explained: "Toby just opened up a coupla months ago. He's got

eastern idees for runnin' his business, so he brought along one of these here wax dummies, which he dressed up in a suit of clothes. He has it standin' in front of his store. 'Course, you know what the boys done to it."

"Perforated it plenty," Melody grinned.

"Shot it full of holes until it's nigh ready to fall apart. I reckon the suit of clothes is all that hold's it together, and the suit is about ready to fall off. It sorta got to be the custom for everybody that passed to take a shot at it. But Toby's stubborn. He refuses to take it in, but he hangs around the door with a shot-gun in his hand, just hopin' for some waddy to throw down on his clothing advertisement. So I warn you, no matter how invitin' that dummy looks, to keep your iron in your holster, less'n you want a skin full of pellets."

Melody shook his head. "I ain't tempted, what with other interests waitin' for my slugs. C'mon to supper with me."

"Can't, I'm on diet. Figurin' to reduce. Besides, Jug-Handle ain't here to take care of the bar. No tellin' when he'll show up. Reckon I'll have to hire me a barkeep one of these days. Long hours is wearin' me to a shadow."

"Yeah," Melody laughed, "I noticed that. You must be down to a mere three hundred by now, ain't you?"

"None of your sarcasm, younker," Pee-Wee growled good-naturedly. "I'm worryin' myself thin, if you know what I mean. Must'a' lost nigh onto twenty pounds just since you drifted into Vaca Wells. You ain't no cure for ragged nerves, that's certain."

ON THE street a short time later, Melody met Jug-Handle. The tramp chuckled through his grime of whiskers when he saw the cowboy. "Still alive, eh?"

"An' kickin'," Melody returned.

Apropos of nothing in particular the tramp said, "Just saw Manitoba and Du Sang drivin' the Diamond-8 buckboard outta town. They looked mad."

"They don't figure to rub me out right to once, then, eh?"

Jug-Handle didn't answer the question directly. "They both rode their broncs in," he said meaningly, "and said broncs weren't tied to the wagon when it started for home."

"Meanin'," Melody mused aloud, "that their broncs has either took wings an' flew home, or were left behind for the fellers that drove the buckboard in. I'm cravin' to know. What's their names?"

"Hump Tracy and Gus Randle," said Jug-Handle. "They're in the Paris Cafe eatin' supper, now."

"Too bad about Du Sang and Manitoba," Melody said seriously. "They pro'bly sprouted saddle sores, and don't feel like forkin' leather. Randle and Tracy have been left behind to bring the horses back. And bein' that Diamond-8 chow don't suit 'em, they stay in town for supper."

"Either that," Jug Handle replied, "or they're stayin' behind to keep an eye on anybody that might start for the Rafter-S later in the evenin'."

"I never thought of that," Melody said dryly. "Mebbe you're right, Jug-Handle. Thanks for the information. I'll remember what you said."

He left the tramp and sauntered on toward the Paris Cafe. Melody entered, ordered supper and glanced about the room. Only two men sat together; the other customers seemed to be alone. Melody judged the two to be Tracy and Randle. He was sure of it a few moments later, when turning suddenly he observed the pair watching him covertly and conversing in low tones.

Melody finished his supper before Randle and Tracy and strolled back to the hitch-rack where his pony was waiting, got into the saddle and rode to the Blue Star Livery. Here, after ordering a good feed for the pony, he entered into a discussion with the proprietor regarding the renting of a buckboard and team.

Ten minutes later he drove the wagon up before the Emporium General Store, alighted from the driver's seat and after tying the horses, mounted the steps that led to the store doorway.

THE Emporium was illuminated by oil lamps swung from the ceiling, and presided over by one Zachariah Hardscrapple—known to the citizens of Vaca Wells, as Hard Zach. He was a gaunt, cadaverous looking individual whose face, for some reason or other, immediately reminded Melody of a rat trap.

"Just the type to starve the women and

children first," Melody said to himself, as his eyes fell upon the disagreeable features of Hard Zach. He glanced curiously about the store at three or four loungers seated on barrels and boxes, then approached Hardscrapple who stood behind the counter, a rank-smelling cigar of doubtful material held between his thin lips.

"Good evenin'," Melody greeted, stopping before the counter.

"Is it?" Hardscrapple replied sourly.

"My mistake," Melody grinned. "It was, until I come in here."

One of the loungers snickered. Hard Zach drew the cigar from his mouth, licked the wrapper, replaced it and blew a cloud of foul aroma into the air. "You wantin' somethin', young man?" he demanded severely. "This ain't no social parlor to talk about the weather in. This here is a general store.

"Is it?" Melody glanced meaningly at the cigar. "My mistake again," he apologized pleasantly. "I thought mebbe it was a blacksmith shop. Sorta smelled like somebody was shoein' a hawss."

There came a loud guffaw from a nearby cracker barrel. "He's a-slanderin' yore see-gar, Zach," a man said.

Hardscrapple's face turned a deep yellow. "This here," he announced crabbily, "is a good ten-cent smoke."

"Jesse James was more honest about such things," Melody chided gently. "Anyway, I ain't interested in your cigars right now. That one you're smokin' reminds me too much of a brand-iron at work. I want some flour."

"I've heerd about you, young man," Hard Zach stated disagreeably, making no move to fill the order. "You—"

"You're to be congratulated," Melody cut in airily. "Du Sang pro'bly advertised me as intendin' to buy a bill of goods for the Rafter-S. Yeah, I'm Melody Madigan. Now that we know each other, how about some flour?"

"Fellers that buck Du Sang," Hardscrapple announced with ominous solemnity, "don't get far as a rule."

"I never work by rule," Melody responded. "By guess or Gosh, that's me, Halfscramble. Now, regardin' that flour—"

"Ain't got none," Hardscrapple snapped, "nor nothin' else for Tom Norris!"

"No?" Melody's voice had suddenly turned chilly. "Hardscrapple, you should know your stock better. I can see your sacks of flour on that back shelf. Now, trot 'em out—two sacks—and be plenty pronto about it, regardless of what Du Sang told you to do."

A tense silence descended on the store. Melody swung half around to watch the other men in the place. Their eyes fell before his direct gaze. He turned back to the proprietor.

"Sometimes," Melody prompted softly, "when folks don't just go the way I like 'em to, I have to persuade 'em. Now, you'll notice I'm wearin' a persuader on each hip. Do I get supplies or don't I?"

"You do," Hardscrapple grunted reluctantly. He turned and shuffled to the back of the store, then returned with two sacks of flour which he dropped on the board counter.

"That's fine!" Melody was all good nature again. "Now, lemme see—oh, yes, I'll want some peaches. 'Bout half a dozen cans, an' tomatoes. Gimme a side of bacon, too. An' coffee. Got any tea? Don't forget bakin' powder. Throw in some Durham and Granger's Twist an' a coupla corncobs. I'll bet you'd like to peddle some of them sardines, wouldn't you? I wonder should I get beans. Yeah, better gimme a few—not many. An' don't overlook matches. Le's see—dried apples an' apricots is good for pies——"

FOR the next half hour Melody kept Hardscrapple in a streaming state of perspiration running from shelves to counter. The cowboy bought of practically everything the store had to offer. Remembering that Jerry Norris had worn overalls, he even purchased several yards from a bolt of green-and-white checked gingham which caught his eye, not forgetting to include needles and thread.

Hardscrapple paused only once in his labors, his head dropping in an almost imperceptible nod to one of the loungers. This man arose from the box upon which he'd been seated and left the store for the street. Melody caught the action, but said nothing.

By now the counter was piled high with supplies. "Mebbe," Melody smiled. "it'd been cheaper to buy your store outright, Harshscruples."

"You're just a-wastin' your money,

Madigan," Hard Zach grumbled. "Norris won't never repay—"

"Oh, yeah," Melody broke in, "I want a scatter-gun, too. Twelve gauge. An' some shells—"

"Ain't got no guns—"

"You're a liar," Melody contradicted cheerfully. "They're in that rack standin' behind the door, in case you've forgot. My gracious, Hashgrubble, you oughta do somethin' about your memory. It's terrible! mebbe old age is creepin' on you. An' you with such a complete stock, too. You should put in a line of clothing and run Toby Harris outta business. But, shucks, I gotta hunch you ain't goin' to be in business much longer. Vaca Wells is due to get wise to you most any day, now."

Muttering oaths under his breath, Hardscrapple made his way to the gun rack. Melody followed him and picked out a double-barreled shot-gun, then his eye falling on a rifle, he picked that up and looked it over.

"This thirty-thirty Winchester looks plumb good, too," he remarked. "Better lay it on the heap, Harkscrumple. Don't forget the ca'tridges. An' it won't be a bad idea to add some forty-five slugs. Norris used some today, an' mebbe he's runnin' short. Coupla boxes." And a moment later he added, somewhat reluctantly, "I reckon that's all, Hardsquabble. Add up the bad news, and remember I'm a poor lonesome cowboy that ain't goin' to be done wrong."

Hard Zach added the long columns of figures which he had jotted down on a scrap of paper, then told Melody the amount.

Melody sighed. " 'Member what I told you, Halfsquibbled, 'bout Jesse James bein' more honest 'bout such things? I'm repeatin' muh statement, with the reg'lar apologies to Jesse. He was a tinhorn compared to you."

"They ain't no law compellin' you to buy," Hardscrapple snarled.

"There oughta be one compellin' you to sell at an honest profit, though." Melody paid the amount asked, then, "Now, that I'm broke again, I feel more natural— No, Hunkscribble, you don't need to help me carry these things to my wagon. I can do it."

"Nobody's offerin'," Hard Zach growled. 'Carry 'em yourself. You're jest a-wastin' your time—"

" 'Cause you think they ain't never goin' to be delivered, and you figure to get 'em back, eh?" Melody grinned. "Betcha ten bucks I get 'em through."

"I ain't no bettin' man," Hardscrapple refused piously.

"Your kind generally ain't, less'n you can lay your chips on a sure thing."

It required several trips to get the supplies loaded into the wagon, but it was finally accomplished. Then, Melody mounted to the driver's seat and tooled the team down the street until he came to the Here's A Go.

Melody entered the saloon to find it had gathered several customers in his absence. It was some time before he gained an opportunity to talk with Pee-Wee. Finally, the fat proprietor waddled down to the end of the bar where the cowboy waited.

"Still figurin' on takin' supplies to the Rafter-S?" Pee-Wee queried skeptically, in a low voice.

Melody nodded. "Uh-huh. Hired a wagon and got it loaded, out front, right now. Your money come handy, Pee-Wee. I got enough goods to start a revolution in mañana land. Hardscrapple wa'n't eager to sell, at first, but he got to seein' things my way. Two of the Diamond-8 punchers was hangin' around town—"

"Hump Tracy an' Gus Randle," Pee-Wee interrupted. "Them two ain't pillars of no church, nuther. Plumb bad, both of 'em. Jug-Handle told me he saw 'em pull out a while back."

"That's them. Hardscrapple nodded a message to a feller that was in the store, and the feller left immediate. They didn't think I saw it, but I did. I reckon he told Tracy and Randle that I was gettin' ready to leave."

Pee-Wee sadly shook his head. "An' them two will be waitin' for you along the trail with one of their dry-gulchin' tricks. You'll never get through, son. Better wait, and I'll see can I get somebody I can trust to go along with you—"

"I'm needin' money bad, Pee-Wee," Melody said. "My bronc an' rig is in the livery. Worth a hundred, I'd say. Wanta make a bet I won't get through."

"A horse ain't no good to me," Pee-Wee grunted seriously, "but I got bettin' in my blood. Good luck, son. I hope I lose—"

"Hey, Pee-Wee!" A voice from the

opposite end of the bar. "Rattle your hocks. We're needin' service."

"S'long," Pee-Wee whispered hoarsely. He swung heavily around and shuffled back to take the orders.

MELODY departed and climbed back on his wagon. He was just passing Toby Harris Gents' Clothing Store, when he was struck by a sudden thought. He reined the horses to the side of the street and pulled to a halt. "Reckon if I'm goin' callin'," Melody chuckled, "I oughta get me some new doodad to wear."

Harris was just closing up for the night when Melody arrived at the store door. He glanced suspiciously at the cowboy, saw that Melody had made no move to harm the clothes dummy standing in front, then swung open the door.

Melody entered, and after some conversation purchased a bright green silk handkerchief which he knotted about his throat in place of his faded bandanna. Then, bidding good night to Harris, he left the store.

He paused a moment before the doorway to roll and light a cigarette. Behind him the lights were suddenly extinguished and the key turned in the lock, as Harris prepared to retire to his bed at the rear of the shop.

There weren't many people on the street, now. Melody glanced both ways along the thoroughfare. Not a horseman was in sight. To the cowboy's left stood the wax dummy with its battered face and sun-faded, bullet-riddled suit of clothes which custom prescribed as the proper raiment for the socially-inclined of Vaca Wells.

Melody grinned as his eyes fell on the dummy. "What do you think, Horatio," he chuckled, "is Randle and Tracy goin' to wait for me just outside of town, or will it be farther on? Huh? You ain't very talkative, are you? If you think they ain't waitin' for me a-tall, nod your head. H'mmm. You think they are, eh? You're pro'bly correct as hell. What'll I do about it? All right, if you don't want to commit yourself, don't speak, then."

He dropped his cigarette butt, smothered it with one toe, and exhaled twin plumes of gray smoke. "Well, if I reckon to reach the Rafter-S tonight, I oughta be startin'. Time, tide an 'Melody Madigan waits for no man. We'll see what sort of lead Randle an' Tracy can throw."

CHAPTER IX

AMBUSH!

TWO men huddled in the brush on either side of a small hollow that marked the approach to the Rafter-S valley. There was no moon, and the stars gave only a faint light that reflected dully on their belt buckles when they moved a trifle, now and then.

"Dammit, Hump!" Gus Randle said, low-voiced, "if that hombre is really figurin' to come through tonight, I certain wish he'd hurry."

"Mebbe he won't come," Hump Tracy suggested.

"Hard Zach sent word that Madigan was orderin' a heap of supplies, didn't he? And didn't Madigan tell Hugo right to his face that he was goin' to bring some groceries to the Rafter-S—"

"I mean, mebbe he'll wait until tomorrow."

"Oh, I get you. I'm hopin' not. I'd like to get this business over an' done with. Don't see why Hugo and Manitoba didn't handle it theirselves."

"What do you care?" Tracy asked. We're drawin' a nice bonus if we rub out Madigan."

Randle gulped uneasily. "Yeah, and if somethin' should go wrong, you know what it means. Hugo said he'd drill us—if Madigan didn't."

"What could go wrong?"

"I dunno—only somethin' might. Suppose Madigan should hear our broncs, or somethin', and circle around us?"

"Hell! Feller, don't be so skeery. Them hawsses is staked out far enough back. He won't hear 'em. You needn't worry. We got everythin' our way. All we gotta do is fill Madigan full of lead when he drives that wagon past."

The two men fell silent. It was well after midnight by this time. Madigan should arrive before long. Suddenly, Hump Tracy sat up, one hand cupped about his ear. "Think I hear him," he announced.

Gus Randle also listened, then nodded. "Team and wagon comin', all right. It must be Madigan."

The two men drew their Colt-guns and moved a trifle closer to the wagon-rutted road that lay but a few yards away. From some distance down the trail came the squeak of wheels, pounding hoofs, and rattle of harness trappings. The sounds

came nearer. They could hear Melody singing:

Sam Bass had a gal up Frisco way;
To him she would be wed,
But an outlaw's life is full of strife,
And so to her he said:

The song broke off a minute while Melody spoke to the horses. The noises of the team and wagon became more distinct. Again, Melody lifted his voice to explain Sam Bass' excuse for not entering into a holy state of matrimony:

A widow you might sudden be
If I took a lovin' wife;
So do not cry, but say good-bye;
I'm ridin' out of your life.

"That bird ain't no canary," Hump Tracy muttered. "If he didn't shoot no better than he warbles, Badgely would still be alive."

"Damn' red-headed fool," from Randle. "He ain't even makin' an attempt to sneak along. Must be he don't realize that Hugo Du Sang won't stand no monkeyin'. We'll get a good look at him, just before he drives down through this hollow. When he gets abreast of us, let him have it."

THE two men crouched closer in the shielding brush. Melody drew nearer, now. It seemed that the girl's father objected to Sam Bass' plans:

But then her paw he says to Sam:
Young man, you'd best stay here;
With this shot-gun, I'll make you one,
So Sam lived another year-r-r.

As the last long-drawn notes of the song left the singer's mouth, the team and wagon appeared at the rim of the hollow. The two would-be killers could see, dimly silhouetted against the starry sky, the wagon piled high with supplies, and the figure slouched on the driver's seat.

"Take it easy, now, you pair of spavined crowbaits," they heard Melody mutter, as the team dipped down the descent. "I'll skin your hides if you tip me over."

The wagon came nearer, as the crouching Randle and Tracy lifted their forty-fives. It was almost abreast of them.

"Let him have it!" Tracy said hoarsely.

The night was suddenly shattered with a series of savage reports, the gloom slashed with bright streaks of orange fire! The figure on the driver's seat swayed to one side, then toppled from the wagon. Startled by the explosions, the horses reared and scrambled wildly, their frightened hoofs digging frantically into the turf.

Randle and Tracy leaped from their place of concealment. "We got him!" Tracy yelled triumphantly. He ran to the head of the team and brought the horses to a halt. "Keep an eye on Madigan, Gus!"

"I'll do more than keep an eye on him," Randle grated savagely. "I'll make sure." He was standing over the prostrate figure on the ground, now, and leveling his gun at the head, he proceeded to empty his cylinder.

"That was a right idea," Tracy exclaimed, as he came running back from the team. "Nothin' like makin' sure, Gus—"

"Wait a minute." Randle's tones were queer. In the light from the gun-flashes he thought he had noticed something odd. "Light a match, Hump."

There came a moment's silence. Then a scratching sound, and a match flared in Tracy's hand. But they didn't have time to examine the object of their murderous slugs.

"I'm afeared you're slayed Horatio," came a voice of assumed grief from the direction of the wagon.

The two men whirled, mouths hanging open in dumb amazement, Tracy still holding the lighted match. In the midst of the piled supplies sat Melody Madigan, a leveled gun in either hand.

"Drop your smoke-rods, skunks," Melody drawled easily. "Then unbuckle your belts and let 'em drop to the ground. Hurry! I'm sure cravin' to unravel some lead at you buzzards!"

The match flickered out in Tracy's hand, but Melody caught the sounds of the guns as they struck the earth. A few seconds later, belts were unbuckled, and also allowed to drop. Melody laughed softly as he eyed the two men, their hands high in the air.

WH—WHERE was you?" Tracy stammered at last.

"Layin' in the wagon, of course," Melody replied. "Hidden under the supplies. This oughta be a lesson to

you fellers not to believe everythin' you see. You're sure dumb, but you put me to a heap of trouble, at that. I kinda figured you'd lay for me in this hollow, seein' as it's the most likely place for an ambush, so I stole Toby Harris' clothes dummy, and put it on the seat. That dummy ain't sociable company, nohow, and I aim to make a complaint to Toby. Wouldn't help me drive, nor nothin'. Just sat there, and then I had to hold him on with one hand, while I druv the team with the other. If you think that was easy, you oughta try drivin' with the lines passed under the seat, sometime. So you thought you was shootin' at me, huh? Well, well! Dummies slingin' lead at a dummy, I calls it. I bet Du Sang will laugh when he hears about this. Yes, he will—not!"

"Hell, feller, cut out the talk," Hump Tracy broke in. "What you figurin' to do with me and Gus?"

"We wouldn't a-done this, only Du Sang made us—" Randle commenced to whine.

"What I got a good notion to do," Melody said, his voice suddenly icy, "is fill you both full of lead and send the bodies to the Diamond-8. But I ain't no murderer. I'll give you a chance. Clear outta the country and stay out, and I won't stop you. If you want to stay and listen to Vaca Wells hooraw you about wastin' lead on a wax figure, that's your problem, but I'm warnin' you—I'll shoot on sight, next time you cut my trail. Make your choice—quick!"

"We'll be travelin'," Tracy replied in harsh, strained tones. "We wouldn't dare face Du Sang, after this—"

"Get goin', then," Melody snapped, "an' don't stop to pick any violets along the way."

"We want our guns—" Randle commenced.

"So do I. Get goin'!" Melody's voice was stern.

There was no further conversation. The two would-be badmen turned and made their way up to the rim of the hollow. For just a brief instant Melody saw their forms blocked against the sky, then they disappeared from sight.

Guns still in hand, not quite trusting the two, he sat waiting on the wagon. Fifteen minutes passed, then, off to his left, he heard the staccato pounding of running hoofs. Melody chuckled. "They're driftin', all right. Headin' north. Well, that's as it should be."

He threw his legs over the side of the wagon and dropped to earth. A few minutes' search located the belts and guns of the two Diamond-8 men. He tossed them in with the supplies. Then he picked up the bullet-riddled clothes dummy. "Poor Horatio, I knew him well," Melody laughed, as he lifted the wax figure to the top of the heap. A few moments later he climbed to the driver's seat, spoke to the horses and moved off down the valley.

SOMETIME within the next half hour Melody neared the house. As he had expected, it was dark. What he didn't expect was the sudden flash of fire from one of the windows, and the rifle bullet that winged viciously past his head!

Melody yanked the team to haunches with astounding speed, made haste to leap to the ground and crouch down behind the horses.

"I've warned you hombres to stay away from here," came the wrathy tones of Tom Norris, "and I meant every word I said. Now vamose!"

"Hey, hold that fire, Norris," Melody yelled. "I ain't no Diamond-8 man. This is me—Melody Madigan."

An instant's silence. Then Melody caught the girl's voice. "It's that fellow who let me take his horse—the one that thinks he's a singer. He's harmless."

Melody's ears burned. He checked the retort that rose to his lips, and again called, "Well, do I get in, or don't I?"

Tom Norris again, something hostile in the tones, "What do you want?"

"I'm your new foreman, and I'm bringing that load of grub and other stuff you need."

He heard a whispered conversation taking place at the window, the girl's low voice: "He's crazy as a bat. Maybe we better let him in and see what he wants." Then Norris replied, "Keep that gun handy. I'll take the Colt and go see." He raised his voice a moment later, "I'll be right out, Madigan."

A minute passed. A light sprung into being in the house. The door opened, and Norris emerged, hobbling with the aid of a cane improvised from the leg of a table. In his other hand he carried his forty-five, ready for instant use. "Now what's all this foolishness?" he demanded tartly.

"Mebbe it is, at that," Melody agreed

sheepishly, rising from his position behind the horses, "only from what I've heard, I kinda thought you might need some help—a foreman, anyway. So I started my job by bringing you some grub."

By this time Norris had seen the loaded wagon. "Well, I'll be damned!" he gasped weakly. "I don't understand. It's a wonder Du Sang didn't try to prevent you coming here." He lowered his six-gun. "What's the idee, anyhow—"

"I've told you," Melody answered. "I'm takin' sides with you, just to make Du Sang peeved. Now, do we unload this wagon, or don't we?"

"If there's food there, by all means unload it!" came Jerry Norris' fervent voice. She came hurrying from the house, fastening one suspender strap of her overalls. "I reckon I misjudged you, cowboy. I'm not understandin' any more than Dad does, but it comes to me that there's another real man beside Tom Norris in this country. Dad, you go in the house. I'll help Melody with the supplies."

Somewhat bewildered by the turn events had taken, Norris reëntered the house and Melody and Jerry commenced sorting out the packages and cans. The girl gave a little squeal of fright upon discovering the clothes dummy.

"Don't be skeered," Melody chuckled. "Horatio won't hurt you. I lifted him in front of Toby Harris' store, but he got killed on the way here. Put him on the driver's seat and loaned him my Stet hat, and a coupla hombres mistook him for me and slung lead at him—"

"Melody! You did have trouble!"

"Aw, none to speak of. Mostly, it was just fun. I'll tell you about it, later. Let's get this wagon emptied first."

Chapter X

WE'LL BE NEEDIN' HELP

EVERYTHING was finally carried inside the ranch-house. The goods overflowed the kitchen table and chairs upon which they were placed. Jerry gave little cries of delight as she examined the various packages. Finally, "Checked gingham! Melody! How in the world did you ever happen to buy this?"

Involuntarily he glanced at her overalls, then noticing her flushed cheeks, he turned away. "Oh, I dunno," he mumbled. "Thought mebbe you could use it for window curtains, or bed-sheets, or table-cloths, or somethin'."

"I'll probably use it for *somethin'*," she giggled. She continued her inspection of cans and sacks. "Coffee! We've been out of coffee for two weeks. I'm goin' to make some, right now."

Cheeks flushed with happiness, tousled red hair clinging in tiny tendrils about her face, the girl hurried to the stove and put on the coffee pot, after starting a fire. Melody settled to a chair in the big kitchen, watching her.

Tom Norris sat across the room, still lost in a daze at the unlooked-for good fortune. "I reckon," he said at last in an awkward voice of apology, "that I'm sorry I slung that thuty-thuty slug at you, Madigan. I dang near made a fool of myself."

"And an angel of me," Melody grinned. "You can have your slugs for the Du Sang crowd, from now on. I brought you another rifle and a shot-gun. Picked up a coupla Colt-guns on the way here, too."

Norris was a loose-limbed man with a weathered face and honest blue eyes, which at present were a trifle moist. He rose and crossed the floor to Melody. Words wouldn't come, but there was considerable warmth in the grip he gave the cowboy.

Crackers were opened, and sardines and peaches. Jerry poured the coffee, and the three sat down. Melody felt a lump come into his throat as he watched Jerry and her father consume food. They were a long way from starvation, but pretty hungry just the same.

Norris' explanation was apologetic: "I killed a cow and took it to town and sold it for a few dollars, but Hardscrapple wouldn't sell me no supplies. Me'n Jerry got sorta tired of eatin' beef all the time, and these vittles just touch the spot."

"From now on," Melody said, a trace of grimness in his tones, "you ain't goin' to have no trouble gettin' what you want. An', by the way, when you get a chance, you owe Pee-Wee Page some thanks. He kicked in two hundred for this load of chow—"

"Page!" Norris exclaimed. "Why, I thought—"

"You thought you didn't have no friends in this country," Melody cut in, "but you're goin' to learn different. I'm offerin' my services as a foreman to begin with—wait! I know you ain't got no

money for wages, but we won't talk about that. I decided to throw in with you when I first saw Jerry today, and I ain't been idle since."

FROM that point on Melody told everything that had happened to him from the moment he arrived at Vaca Wells, including the fight with Badgely, the meeting with Du Sang and the encounter with Tracy and Randle on the way to the Rafter-S. Jerry's eyes were shining frank admiration by the time he finished.

"Haven't I been telling you, Dad," she said, "that it wouldn't help any to worry? Put your trust in the ravens, they'll feed you everytime—'specially red-headed ravens." She drained her coffee cup with a long sigh of contentment, and commenced rolling cigarettes for the two men, while they discussed the situation.

"Yes," Norris said at last, "Page gave you pretty much all the information there was to give. We haven't any proof, of course, but it's Du Sang doin' the rustlin' around here. He wants my place, because the water on his own holdin's is peterin' out. We've been here about six years. Du Sang come in a mite over three years ago. The first year he come, everybody lost a few cows, but the last two years he's been makin' me the heavy loser—"

"Page said somethin' about that," Melody broke in. "He told me Du Sang tried to buy the Rafter-S from you."

Norris nodded. "Yes, coupla years back—but he only offered about a fifth of what it's worth— When Jerry's ma died, we sold our old place up no'th, and come down here. At the time I took over the Rafter-S it was mortgaged to the hilt, but I worked hard, and we was gettin' it paid off in fine shape. After my cows commenced disappearin', though, I couldn't make any money. Had to let all my help go. To top that off, Du Sang took over the mortgage on this place, and he's doin' his best to keep me from makin' my final payments."

"Pee-Wee didn't tell me about that," Melody said. "Mebbe he didn't know Du Sang held the mortgage on the Rafter-S."

"Pro'bly hadn't heard of it," Norris replied. "To the best of my knowledge, Du Sang never registered that mortgage. Sometime back he figured to put me out of the way, altogether. One of his gunmen meets me in Vaca Wells and starts a fight. I beat him to the draw and wiped him out, but he succeeded in throwin' a slug into my laig an' broke it. That's held me back a heap, too. Otherwise, I'd have gone some place else for my supplies, and I didn't want to take a chance on Jerry makin' a long trip alone."

"Dad thinks I can't take care of myself," Jerry put in scornfully.

"I don't blame him," Melody replied, "so long as the Du Sangs are runnin' hawg-wild on the range. I reckon Du Sang and his gang are due for a fight right soon. I'm goin' to see what can be done about gettin' in some more help, and we'll try and put the Rafter-S on a workin' basis, again. That is, providin' I get that job I applied for."

"Job, hell!" Norris exploded. "You do everythin' you expect to do, son, and you'll come in for a share of the outfit. I figgered it as lost, anyhow. You can have anythin' the place has to offer."

"Anythin'?" Melody looked at the girl, then grinned at Norris.

Norris missed Melody's allusion, and the girl's crimson face. "Anythin'," he repeated. "Why, goldarn it, son, you've sorta give me new life already, with just thinkin' what you've done so far. Puttin' Badgely outta the way was a good move. He was bad."

THEY talked an hour or so longer before Melody pushed back his chair and arose. "Well, I'll be gettin' back to town. It'll be well past sun-up now, before I hit Vaca Wells, and I wanta put Horatio back in front of Toby Harris' place before Harris finds out who took him. I'll drift out here again just as soon as I can."

"I was hoping you'd stay the night," Jerry invited. "We've an extra bed, and I'd like to show you I can build a real breakfast, when I've got something to work with."

"Better stay, Melody," Norris urged. "It'll be a reg'lar banquet by the time Jerry gets finished with that bunch of chow—"

"Did you bring your accordion?" Jerry broke in suddenly.

"Nope," Melody laughed. "Left it at the livery with my hawss and rig. Thought you didn't like my voice."

"Cowboy," the girl said warmly, "I'm commencin' to think you got just about the peachiest voice I've heard in a month

of blue moons. I was all wrong before. When you open your mouth, you say something!"

Melody grinned widely. "Sa-a-ay, you ain't heard nothin' yet! Ain't I told you us red-heads has got to stick together. I meant it!" And having dared so much, he suddenly became covered with confusion. "All right, I'll stay the night, and get an early start tomorrow," he added, to cover his embarrassment. "Reckon I better go put them hawsses up—"

At that moment there came the sounds of running hoofs approaching the house. The two men started for the door, guns in hands.

"Better let me go," Melody said swiftly. "You stay—"

"Hello the house!" came a hail from the rider. "Is Madigan there?"

"It's Jug-Handle—that hobo that hangs around the Here's A Go," Melody said. He flung open the door and stepped outside.

"H'lo, Jug-Handle," the cowboy greeted, "what you wantin'?"

Jug-Handle laughed, without dismounting. "Pee-Wee just lost five bucks. I bet my week's salary you'd get through."

"He'll be owin' me a hundred, too," Melody laughed.

"He was afraid he might win," Jug-Handle explained, "so he give me that rusty ol' hawg-laig of his, got your hawss outta the livery, and sent me on to help, if needful. So here I am. How many of the Du Sang crowd did you have to kill to get here?"

Melody told the story. While he was talking, Norris and Jerry came out and joined them, the girl bearing a cup of hot coffee which Jug-Handle drank with evident relish.

"I'm glad you come out, Jug-Handle," Melody said after a time. "I'll be stayin' the night, here. You can leave my hawss, and take the wagon back for me, if you will. Likewise, leave Horatio in his accustomed position, outside the Gent's Clothing Store."

"I'll do that, cowboy," Jug-Handle replied. "And tomorrow I'll do plenty tellin' of the story, too. Du Sang will be fit to be tied. Mebbe we'll be able to laugh him outta the country. Ridicule will accomplish what fightin' won't, sometimes."

He swung easily down from the pony's back and climbed to the seat of the wagon. A minute later he had doffed his tattered sombrero to Jerry, and rattled off down the valley.

Melody was thoughtful as he led his horse down to the barn, Norris and Jerry on either side of him. "Notice how that 'bo lighted from my bronc?" he asked.

"Easy like," Jerry said. Norris nodded.

"Easy is right," Melody continued. "Jug-Handle may be a tramp, now, but I'm bettin' a stack of blues that he knows how to rope an' shoot, as well as ride. Cow country stuff, I calls him."

Meanin'," Norris suggested, "that he ain't so much a tramp as he appears to be?"

"That exact," Melody replied. "When I get back to Vaca Wells, I aim to *habla* with that hombre a mite. Mebbe we could hire him to make a hand on the Rafter-S."

"Lord knows," Norris sighed, "we'll be needin' plenty help."

Chapter XI

CORNERED!

THE sun was high overhead by the time Melody loped Jezebel along the main street of Vaca Wells. He had half expected to met Du Sang or others of the Diamond-8 outfit on his way, but nothing of the sort happened. He noticed several pedestrians smile and nod at him as he passed. "Folks seem to be gettin' right friendly, all of a sudden," he mused. "What's the idea, I wonder?"

As he was passing the Gents' Clothing Store, a sudden hail reached his ears. Melody shifted in the saddle and saw the chubby form of Toby Harris standing in the doorway. Melody glanced guiltily at the dummy which, looking much the worse for wear, was standing in its accustomed place.

"I want that you should talk to me," Harris called a second time.

No way out of it, it seemed. Melody reined Jezebel around and guided the little mare to the sidewalk. "You wa'n't meanin' me, was you?" Melody asked innocently.

"You're Mister Madigan, ain't it?" Harris demanded heavily. "And you took my adver-dise-ment away last night, when you left my shop."

"Guilty," Melody admitted the charge. "What do I owe you?"

Harris came closer, mouth expanding in a sudden smile of friendliness. "Not

one cent, young feller. To my clothes-figure you are welcome, any dime. These here now Du Sangs has been needin' their take downs for a long while. Dem it was what first shoot bullets at my ad-verdise-ment. I am bleased that you blay a joge on dem. Dat is all."

"Thanks, Mister Harris. I won't for-get." Melody shook hands with the little man, and loped off down the street.

There was quite a crowd in the Here's A Go when Melody entered the saloon—more than was usually found there at that hour of the day. Pee-Wee's eyes lighted with pleasure as they fell on the cowboy. "Back, eh, Melody," he greeted. "Glad to see you. Gents, have a drink on the house, and show Madigan we ain't all dummies when it comes to appreciatin' a good joke."

There was some laughter. Many of the men glanced with open admiration at Melody as they surged up to the bar. Somewhat mystified, Melody joined them in the drink, then asked Pee-Wee, "Where's Jug-Handle?"

"Out back, loafin', I reckon," Page answered.

Melody started for the door. Pee-Wee came around the bar and joined him at the entrance. "Son, I was sure glad you put it across—even if it does cost me a hundred. I'll pay that shortly, at the rate trade is pickin' up."

"I don't quite get you," Melody frowned. "I been receivin' smiles from strangers ever since I hit town."

"It's that trick you played on Randle and Tracy. Jug-Handle has spread the story high, wide and handsome. Fellers has been driftin' in here, right along, just to hear me tell about it. Cowboy, you're the talk of Vaca Wells, and Du Sang is madder than a wet hornet."

"You better not talk too much, Pee-Wee," Melody warned. "Du Sang will be hoppin' down on you—"

"Du Sang be damned!" Pee-Wee exclaimed. "Now that you've bucked his game, they's a heap of folks are commencin' to talk openly against him. He was in here about an hour ago, His two brothers are with him. They've threatened to get me, so it doesn't matter what I say, now. They're out to get you, too. Big Foot Higley—he's sheriff, you know—has been lookin' for you. He's just a big bluff, though. One of Du Sang's pups, of course."

"If they want me, they'll have to move pronto," Melody said grimly. "I'll be ridin' out to them other outfits you told me about, the Slash-O and Lazy-V, in a little while." He told Pee-Wee what had happened the night before, then finished, "I'm figurin' to get some help from them two outfits, if possible, but I want to see Jug-Handle first."

"You'll find him out back," Pee-Wee said. "I'll talk some more when I get a mite of time. Customers keepin' me busy, now."

PEE-WEE made his way back to the bar, and Melody stepped into the street. Rounding the back of the building, he found Jug-Handle dozing in the shadow of the back wall. He stood looking down at the shabby figure a minute, then to his surprise, Jug-Handle spoke:

"Howdy, Melody." He opened his eyes and smiled lazily at the cowboy.

"Huh! Thought you was asleep."

"Lotta folks think that," Jug-Handle drawled. "But sometimes I learn a heap, layin' around thisaway."

"Exactly what I wanted to see you about," Melody replied. He dropped down beside the tramp, bracing his back against a nearby whisky barrel which served as a step to the back door of the Here's A Go. "Just what do you know about this range, anyway?"

"I only been here a week," Jug-Handle evaded.

Melody repeated Jug-Handle's words. "Sometimes a feller can learn a heap layin' around. And listenin'. I'm cravin' information."

The tramp didn't answer for a moment. Finally, he picked up a small stick of wood from the ground, and traced three cattle-brands in the sandy earth: the Rafter-S, an inverted V-like character with beneath it a letter S; the Lazy-V, a letter V lying on its side <, and the Slash-O, an oblique line, with below it a trifle to the right, a letter O /o.

"There's three of the brands for this part of the country," Jug-Handle commented carelessly.

Melody looked at the sketches and gazed dreamily off into distance. "The Du Sang crowd has been here about three years," he said. "I gotta hunch that Du Sang changed his brand when he bought the present Diamond-8."

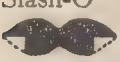
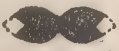
Jug-Handle nodded. "Yeah, before Du Sang had it, it was known as the Circle-Bar-Circle. Some called it the Bridle-Bit. Du Sang changed that to Diamond-8 as soon as he bought the outfit."

"The evidence piles up," Melody drawled. He looked down at the three sketches, then taking the stick from Jug-Handle's fingers, he deftly traced additional lines which converted each of the three brands to a Diamond-8 design:

The two men exchanged understanding smiles. With one foot, Melody scuffed out the drawings. "So much explained," he drawled.

"If Du Sang ever got started, he'd make a killing," said Jug-Handle.

"I haven't got the ear-markings straight yet," Melody suggested.

"That's easy, too. Du Sang planned well. The Rafter-S splits the right ear and gotches the left: ; The Slash-O under-half-crops both ears:  ; the Lazy-V swallow-forks right and left:  "

Melody frowned. "That don't leave nothin' for Du Sang to do, but gotch—" he commenced.

"Du Sang gotches both ears " Jug-Handle finished for him, "which naturally cuts off all traces of the markin's of the other three outfits."

DEVILISH neat, I calls it," Melody commented admiringly. "Wonder folks didn't think of all this before, though."

"Folks is plumb trustful, sometimes. At beef roundup, the Lazy-V and Slash-O have always worked together, coverin' the territory that lays east of Vaca Wells. The Diamond-8 and Rafter-S took care of the range west of town. Norris' roundin'-up has been limited the last coupla years, and they wa'n't nobody in particular to check up the Diamond-8 activities. 'Nother thing, Du Sang never ships with the other spreads, but runs his stock down below the Border. Claims to have a reg'lar market down there."

"Devilish neat," Melody repeated. "Fixes things so he can take care of brands and ear-markin's both. It's time runnin' irons went outta use on this range. A good stamp-iron will prevent a lot of rustlin', I'm thinkin'. Jug-Handle, did you ever consider goin' to work?"

The tramp yawned. "Considered it—yes. But it always seemed kinda laborious like, so I give up the thought. Nope, work ain't for me."

"You're a liar," Melody grinned contradiction. "Feller, I ain't so green as I am cabbage lookin', but we'll go into your reasons later. I'm goin' to drill out to the Lazy-V and Slash-O and see can I drum up some hands for Norris. You're hired, now, of course. Your first job is to drop over to the blacksmith shop and get a coupla Rafter-S stamp-irons made up. It won't take long. Then get out to Norris' place and tell him I put you on. I want all the country combed around that valley. I gotta hunch they's more cows there than Norris thinks he's got. Norris can't ride yet, but the girl will be willin' to fork a bronc and help. Thank God! They got some ponies left, anyhow—"

He broke off suddenly. Both men tensed, then swiftly gained their feet. They had heard a noise from around the corner. Rounding the edge of the structure, Melody saw Hugo Du Sang and two other men, just moving away.

"Wa'n't lookin' for me, was you, Du Sang?" Melody queried softly.

Du Sang and his two companions whirled like a flash. Melody, after the first glance, guessed that the other two were Du Sang's brothers, Guy and Luke. But the resemblance ended with their features. Guy was slender, with a wisp of a mustache adorning his upper lip. He appeared to be something of a dandy, considering the robin's-egg blue silk shirt and beaded throat-latch on his Stetson. Luke was Guy's direct antithesis—slovenly, bristly jowls, stoop-shouldered. His long limbs were clad in tattered overalls, and his mud-colored hair hung down before his small, pig-like eyes. However, the guns of both brothers looked efficient.

Du Sang didn't answer Melody's question at once. His face reddened a trifle, then, "No, Madigan, I ain't lookin' for you—yet. But Sheriff Higley is."

"You can tell the sheriff I've been around quite a while," Melody replied coolly. "Furthermore, I'm aimin' to stay a considerable spell longer."

"Don't be too sure of that, Madigan—" Luke Du Sang commenced.

"You let me handle this, Luke," Hugo cut in angrily. He again directed his at-

tention to Melody. "Madigan, folks don't buck me and get away with it."

"No?" Melody laughed scornfully. "I bucked a coupla your crew last night, Du Sang—made monkeys of 'em, in fact. In case you're wonderin' what's become of Randle and Tracy, they're high-tailin' it out of the country as fast as they can go—on my orders!"

Hugo Du Sang flushed. "I don't care nothin' about them. Didn't even know they intended holdin' you up—"

"Expect me to believe that?" Melody drawled.

"Don't give a damn whether you do or not," Du Sang growled. "Just remember, I ain't through with you yet, Madigan. Come on, boys." He wheeled abruptly, and followed by Luke, stepped back to the street and disappeared around the corner of the Here's A Go.

Guy Du Sang lingered a moment, a sarcastic smile playing about his lips. "Madigan," he said softly, something of a smooth purring quality in the tones, "Hugo said he wasn't through with you yet. I haven't even started with you. When I do, look out!"

"That's fine. Handsome," Melody smiled, but his eyes were cold. "In case you feel the urge to start, now, fill your hand."

Guy Du Sang slowly shook his head, held his hands well away from gun-butts. "The time ain't come yet, Madigan—but it will." Then, he, too, turned and was gone.

SO THEM'S the three Du Sang brothers, eh?" Melody said to Jug-Handle a minute later. "That youngest one is a snaky sort of critter, ain't he? I kinda underestimated him at first, due to his dude appearance, but I reckon he's as deadly a sidewinder as a man would want to find in his blankets."

"Amen to that, brother," Jug-Handle said solemnly. "I wonder if they heard much of what we was sayin'."

Melody shrugged his shoulders. "It don't much matter, I reckon. We're both old enough to keep our eyes open, anyway. Jug-Handle, when you ride to the Rafter-S you better take that Colt-gun of Pee-Wee's with you. It ain't no great shucks as a weapon, but it might come handy. You'll find Randle's and Tracy's guns out there, and mebbe Norris can outfit you with overalls and a decent hat. You better get over to the blacksmith shop and see about them stamp-irons, right away."

"Got your mind made up that I'm goin' to work, ain't you?" the tramp said lazily.

"Nothin' else. You're needed, feller—and the work won't be strange to you. I'm plumb sure of that."

Jug-Handle smiled cryptically. "Mebbe not—All right, I'll see you later." With a careless wave of the hand, he sauntered away in the direction of the blacksmith shop.

Melody entered the Here's A Go and had a drink with Pee-Wee. He stood talking for half an hour or so, then departed for the hitch-rack. Before mounting Jezebel, he glanced both ways along the street, in search of the Du Sang trio. Nothing was to be seen of the three, nor was there anyone in sight who looked as though he might be a sheriff.

"Them coyotes is pro'bly in the Silver Spur, cookin' up some heap bad medicine for one red-headed hombre known as Melody Madigan," the cowboy mused. "Oh, well—" He placed one foot in the stirrup and swung up to Jezebel's back. "We're ramblin' some more, hawss." Wheeling the mare, he started her off down the roadway.

BY TWO in the afternoon, Melody was well on his way to the Slash-O, with about five miles yet to cover. East of Vaca Wells, the scenery was a trifle more rugged, thickly carpeted at spots with heaped fragments of splintered granite. At others, the yucca grew in profusion, giving way only now and then, to stretches of mesquite and chaparral.

This was all "up and down" country. Not mountainous, to be sure, but the trail wound in and out among low hills. Occasionally, Melody saw small bunches of Slash-O stock, intersprinkled with a mingling of Lazy-V cows.

He had just reined Jezebel around a sharp bend in the trail, winding between two hills, when he glimpsed two riders cutting down through the mesquite on the rise of ground to his right. They were approaching rapidly, spreading out a trifle as they came on. It looked as though they were planning to cut off Melody's advance.

Melody drew reins to a cautious walk,

and closely scrutinized the pair of riders. It took him but an instant to recognize them as Luke and Guy Du Sang.

"Damn' 'em!" the cowboy chuckled. "They heard me tell Jug-Handle I was comin' out here. I reckon they figure to spoil all my fun, if they can." He considered rapidly: "Wonder if I better turn tail and run from 'em. It wouldn't be dignified, but it might be a heap more healthy."

He checked Jezebel, intending to wheel the mare and beat a hasty retreat. Then, he stopped. The two Du Sangs had caught the movement, and also brought their ponies to an abrupt halt. Simultaneously, the hands of each reached to the rifles in their saddle scabbards.

"Damn' if they ain't got me in a fix," Melody mused ruefully. "If I stick, they will drill me. If I run for it, they'll reach me with their smoke-poles. 'Course it ain't certain they'd kill me, but I wouldn't want to take no chances on it. No two ways about it, I'm cornered! Well, I might as well go down fightin' as runnin'. Wish I had a rifle, here. I'll stick. Mebbe I'll be able to talk 'em out of it."

He reined the mare around to face the two riders, and sat easily in the saddle waiting their arrival. The outlook was none too bright.

(Exciting? Just wait to see installment III in the next West.)

NEXT ISSUE

GEEHOSIFAT JONES

in

The Gunslick from Hellangone

by

GEORGE C. HENDERSON

To The Last Drop

by

GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Stormy Peace

by

RALPH CUMMINS

Coming Soon

FORGERS OF FATE

by

W. C. TUTTLE

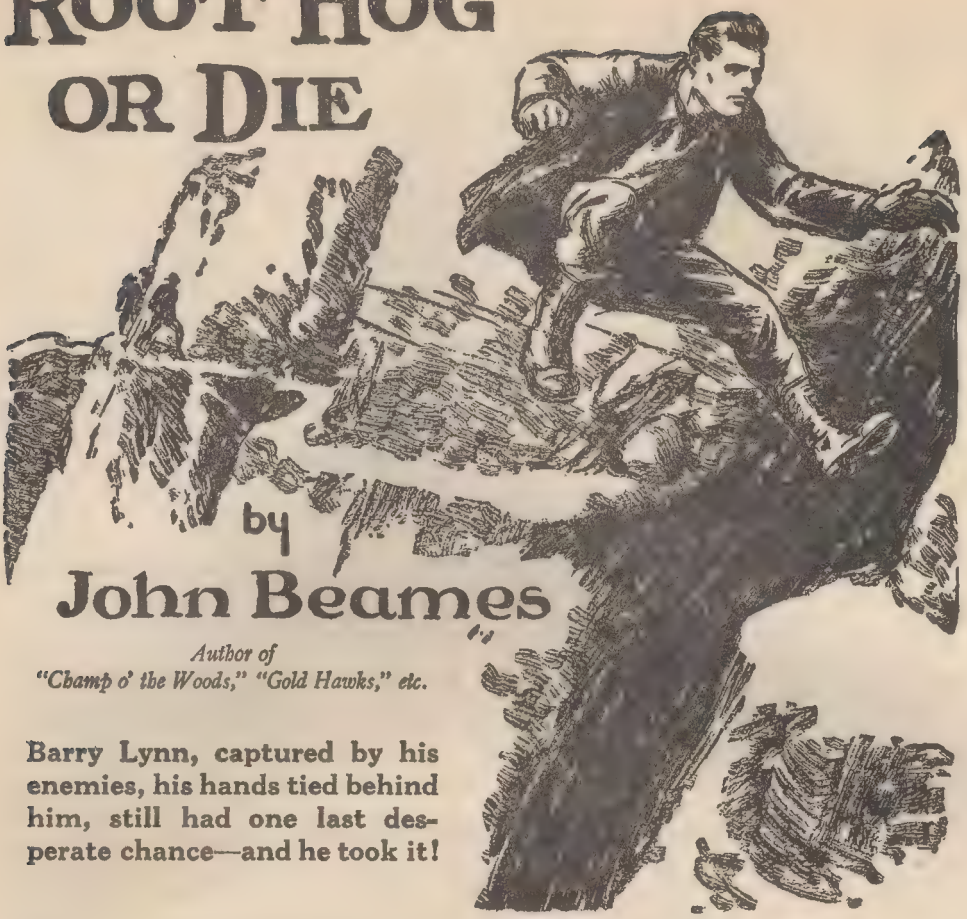
Coming Soon

CHAFFEE OF ROARING HORSE

by

ERNEST HAYCOX

ROOT HOG OR DIE



by

John Beames

Author of
"Champ o' the Woods," "Gold Hawks," etc.

Barry Lynn, captured by his enemies, his hands tied behind him, still had one last desperate chance—and he took it!

BARRY LYNN dropped down the steep side of Corkscrew Mountain like a goat into Sunny Valley. Things were bad in the little town. The bars were petering out and the place was full of men hanging on desperately in hopes of another stampede.

Barry went down the single long street between the mountain and the river like a comet done up in clothes, and burst into Homer Lyon's store with a wild Indian whoop.

He flung on the counter a dirty little leather poke which dropped with a dull and heavy sound.

"How," he said and lifted his voice. *"Ho-o-ow!"*

Homer's despondent face brightened. He snatched at the poke and weighed it in his hand.

"I found um, I found um," yelled Barry. "There's paydirt on the bars. Oh, boy, I'm agoin' to see the elephant an' listen to the owl. *Hoo-hoo.*"

"Shut up," said Homer quickly, with a glance at the loungers in the store. "You talk too much. Come in back."

But the mischief was done. The news was already speeding up the street that "Crazy" Barry Lynn had made a big strike. Barry Lynn wasn't really crazy. He was just wild like the mountain goats among which he lived.

Hungry, desperate men began feverishly to overhaul their packs in preparation for the coming stampede.

It was Jebb who took the news to Roughy O'Connor, sulking in a back room of the Big Grizzly saloon.

"We're in on this," announced Roughy.

But no late comer could get near Homer Lyon's store. The wildest rumors flew from lip to lip as the crowd craned and trampled and elbowed about the door. Word that Barry had just slipped out the back way sent a wave surging up the alley. Keen-eyed watchers perched

themselves among the rocks on the mountainside.

But Barry was still in the back room with Homer Lyon and Walt Devon and several more.

"You done it," said Homer a little fretfully. "It's a wonder you wouldn't blow a horn in the street. You're goin' to have the whole valley, cripples an' all, campin' on your trail from now on."

"Who's goin' to catch me 'less I let 'em," vaunted Barry excitedly. "When I'm goin' some place only the eagles can stay with me. I run the wild goats knock-kneed an' my tracks is forty foot apart."

"Can you go faster'n a bullet?" asked Homer significantly. "Talk sense an' don't holler so loud."

"All my friends is in on this," said Barry. "Them what used me white; them what grubstaked me; them what stood me a drink when I was down. All the rest can go to hell. Called me Crazy Barry, huh. I'll show 'em I'm a man what stands by my friends. But the other dirty shysters, I wouldn't give 'em a pleasant look."

"Yes, but how're you goin' to make it so just your friends get in on this?"

"Well, I'll tell you just where she lays," offered Barry.

Homer flung up a hand. "Shut up, shut up, you fool. We don't want to know. The fewer knows it the better. You keep the location right under your own hat. What we got to dope out is a scheme for gettin' just the one outfit on the ground before the stampede shows up."

They discussed the problem at length.

MEANWHILE Roughy had given up listening to baseless rumors and had gathered his own little group of followers in the Big Grizzly saloon to arrange measures to avoid being left out in the cold.

A cunning and unscrupulous brain worked behind Roughy's big-jowled, flat-nosed face with its low sloping forehead and little pig eyes.

"Catch Barry," he said, "an' the rest'll be easy. I'll be makin' him talk if I get my hands on him."

"How in hell will you catch him?" asked Marks. "He's like a damn jack-rabbit to travel."

"Wait till Jebb gets back," said Roughy. "He'll be havin' something to tell us."

IN HOMER LYON'S the other boys were settling the final details of the plan.

"All right," said Barry. "Soon as it comes dark then. I hit up over the mountain an' start the stampede. You fellers lays low till they're all gone an' then hikes for Shindig Pass. I ditches the crowd some place an' strikes down Baldy's Creek an' meets you at the ford. How's that?"

"That's the idee," said Homer. "Think you can do it?"

"Do it like a damn," said Baarry confidently. "It's only the eagles——"

"Yes, we heard that all before," interrupted Homer with a grin. "How long do you figure it'll take you?"

"Don't know. I'd ought to be at the ford about as soon as you are, but if I have trouble gettin' 'em shook off, just keep right on for the Shindig an' I won't be long catchin' up."

They did not hear a noise as of a rat stirring under the cracked boards of the floor, and no one saw the lean and cat-like Jebb creep out of a hole under a back corner of the store where a post had been planted to keep the building level. But three minutes later Jebb was telling his tale to Roughy and the rest of the gang.

Darkness came down, but brought no peace to Sunny Valley. Roughy and his five followers slipped away early one by one, to meet at an agreed point and lay their ambush on Baldy's Creek. Homer Lyon and four more were waiting for Barry to lead the stampede away before striking for the Shindig Pass.

Throughout the rest of the town men crouched behind half closed doors, with their packs on their backs, and others lay hidden behind rocks at every outlet to the place.

"Well, Barry, take care of yourself," said Homer at last. "Don't be foolhardy. There's some damned hard cases in this burg. If you can't make her, come right back here an' we'll try another time."

"It'll be just pie for me," said Barry confidently. "Bet I'm at the ford as soon as you are. These yaps'll have to have wings to follow me. Watch me unloose my feet. So long."

THE street was deserted when Barry stepped out into it. Not a light showed in any window and a strong cold wind from the snows set the flimsy wooden buildings creaking. But

Barry knew that eyes watched him from darkened windows and doors ajar as he passed softly by.

He reached the last shanty and turned up the pack trail that winds over the shoulder of Corkscrew Mountain toward Bootheel Creek, where three starving prospectors ate all of their boots but the heels before they made the strike that brought them wealth.

The trail had not been traveled since the creek played out and it was a steep and difficult road at any time.

A penetrating whistle piped out behind Barry and he chuckled. "That'll fetch 'em," he said, and hitched his pack a little higher on his shoulders.

In Sunny Valley the dark street was suddenly full of fully dressed and equipped men. "Bootheel Creek trail" was the word that passed from man to man. The stampede was on.

When Homer Lyon and his little band came out into the street a little later they saw on either hand gaping doors that flapped idly in the wind with no one to close them.

Barry walked fast but not too fast. He did not want the crowd to get discouraged too soon. He showed himself plainly on a mountain meadow, halting and looking back as if for pursuers. The stampede halted with warning whispers on the edge of the forest.

And now Barry really began to move. The leaders of the crowd, from the crest of a ridge, saw him descending the slope as a goat goes, leaping from rock to rock.

Concealment was thrown away, and the whole pack bayed openly upon his trail. Men fell but no one stopped to pick them up. The swiftest forged into the lead, and the heavy-footed panted and swore in their wake.

Barry dipped into the valley and crossed Dead Indian Creek, dashing knee-deep through the racing water, and then faced the almost perpendicular ramp of the further wall. He no longer even pretended to be following a trail. Up he went, clinging to twisted pine and ragged bush, and after him scrambled his pursuers. But many stood still in the valley, gaping sullenly upward and remarking in heartfelt tones that he ought to be shot.

Barry looked back. Three persistent followers were still on his track. I'll give 'em a run," he chuckled, and fled like a ghost along a ledge no more than twelve inches wide with a five-hundred foot drop below him. The ledge broke off in midair. He stooped and peered, stood up, took a deep breath, swung his arms, and launched out into space.

The rocky pinnacle he aimed at crumbled under the impact of his heels. He threw himself to one side. A mountain bush gave him a handhold. He wedged his knee into a cleft, and heard the dislodged boulder go crashing down the precipice.

An hour later he was over the saddle and trotting down Baldy's Creek, and the stampede, cursing him fervently, was trickling back to Sunny Valley.

BARRY was panting a little, for the last climb had been a stiff one, but he had thrown off all care, and from time to time he whistled shrilly a fragment of a tune.

It was his whistle that gave warning to Roughy and his crew, hidden in a narrow neck where Baldy's Creek flows between sheer walls of rock.

Barry saw a vague form detach itself from the darkness, and heard Roughy's sardonic voice, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Barry Lynn, Esquire. Set down an' let's have a little talk."

Then in a sharper tone, "Don't try any funny work, we got you covered back an' front."

Barry turning his head, saw that it was so. He shrugged his shoulders and gave a careless laugh.

"Well, what about it?" he asked.

"Just that we want you to lead the way to your strike an' no foolin'."

Barry's face set like a flint. "The fellers I lead to that strike are my friends, see," he said. "An' you go to hell."

"Big talk," retorted Roughy. "That don't cut no ice with us. It's root hog or die for you. Savvy?"

They closed in upon him and took away his gun. "Fetch him out of here," said Roughy.

Guarded so closely that he could see no chance for a dash, they took him out of the canyon and up the mountain for several miles to a small level among trees and rocks. Here they tied him fast to a tree by Roughy's orders.

"Now are you goin' to do what we want?" asked Roughy.

"If you was to kill me," said Barry, "it wouldn't do you no good."

"Do you know anything about hot

gunbarrels," asked Roughy in his most sinister tone.

Barry turned pale, but he shook his head.

Roughy picked up Barry's gun and stuck its barrel in the fire, watching his prisoner's face with a malignant grin. Slowly the muzzle turned a dull red. Roughy brought it over and stuck it close under Barry's nose, whose head jerked back in spite of himself.

"Feel like doin' what I say?" jeered Roughy. "Or do you want I would warm you up a little more."

Barry could feel his face scorching. He looked round at the hard savage faces of his captors.

"All right, damn you," he blurted out sulkily.

Roughy laughed and slapped his leg. "Huh, you see it don't pay to get fresh with us. We do be knowin' ways of makin' men talk. It's root hog or die."

"Aw, shut up," snapped Barry. "Go an' root yourself, you look like a hawg to me."

"Another yap out of you," snarled Roughy, "an' I'll make you eat this."

Barry bit his lip but kept silence.

"Well, we'll get a little sleep now," said Roughy. "An' tomorrow, like a good little man, you go along with us an' show the road. But you'll stay tied, that way you won't be runnin' off on us."

THEY let Barry lie down, but did not loose the bonds on his wrists, and they took turns staying awake to watch him. After a vain effort to free his hands, he presently fell asleep from sheer weariness.

He was awakened by Roughy stirring him with his toe. "Come on with you. Get up."

Barry's face became stubborn again. "I won't get up until you loose my hands an' give me something to eat," he said.

"You don't eat till we get there," jeered Roughy.

Barry closed his eyes again. "Ain't goin'," he said with finality.

"Go on, Roughy, why can't he have something to eat?" asked Marks, who was not without decent feelings.

"Who the hell do be runnin' this?" demanded Roughy ferociously.

A wrangle ensued, the ratlike Jebb siding with Roughy and the others with Marks, and finally Barry's hands were untied, and he was given food and allowed to bathe his swollen wrists in a spring.

They set out along the flank of the mountain.

After a time Roughy halted suspiciously. "Where are you takin' us?" he asked. "Think you're goin' to run us right into your friends on the Shindig Pass, eh? Well, we do be knowin' all about that. You take us some other road."

Barry looked at him some time in silence. "You seem to know a lot of things," he said at last.

"More'n we let on," nodded Roughy.

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "All right, but don't blame me if the road I take you's a hard one."

He turned and began to climb the mountain. By afternoon they had passed through the last fringe of stunted pines into a region of bare rock, grass tufts and moss. Over their heads hung the eternal snows.

"Here, where in hell are you takin' us now?" snarled Roughy.

Barry dropped upon a rock and let his hands dangle limply. "Well, if you know so damn much why don't you choose your own road?" he inquired. "You won't let me take you over the Shindig, but we got to cross the divide."

"Aw, let up on him, Roughy," put in Marks. "We don't know where he's takin' us, but we can make it damn hot for him if he tries any crooked work."

"I don't trust him no further than I can see him," grumbled Roughy. "Have it your own way, then, but don't blame me if he puts one over on you."

In the early dusk Barry brought them to the edge of a dizzy precipice. In the already dark valley below the great pines looked like moss. Above them were hanging snowfields and naked crags, topped by a soaring cone, softly pink in the last rays of the sun. A razor-edged wind howled around them.

"Along here an' then we start to go down," said Barry cheerfully.

"I'm goin' to tie your hands first," announced Roughy. "Then any monkey business an' over you go."

"How the devil am I goin' along there with my hands tied?" complained Barry.

"That's up to you. It's root hog or die with you this trip."

"I heard about that brother of yours before," snapped Barry.

"I'll fix you for that after," growled

Roughy. "Put your hands behind you or I'll fix you now."

He jerked the knots cruelly tight, and took hold of the free end of the rope. "Lead on now. Try an' run an' I'll swing you over."

THERE was no help for it. Barry began the perilous passage, the others following in single file. Often the way was merely a ledge so narrow that they had to shuffle along pressed close against the rock. One false step and the valley a thousand feet below would receive their mangled bodies.

They came to where an avalanche had bitten a great gap in the lip of the cliff, and had to work up and round on a steep slope of broken rock.

Barry slipped and fell with an exclamation of pain. "Loose my hands," he pleaded. "I hurt my knee."

"Yes, an' have you hop up and run for it," sneered Roughy.

"How can I run when my knee's hurt?"

"You say it's hurted. Maybe it is an' maybe it ain't. Anyway I ain't takin' no chances on you. Get up and hump." He gave the rope a savage jerk.

Barry hobbled a few steps and sank down again. "Either you loose my hands or carry me," he said, and refused to rise.

Between them they helped him across the slide. It had now grown quite dark.

"Damn you," snarled Roughy, "I got a notion to kill you right here. We got to camp in this hell of a place. It's too dark to go any further."

"It's only just a little piece further on an' we commence to go downhill," urged Barry. "Then we can be out of the wind an' get some wood for a fire."

Limping painfully he led them round the bulge of a great pinnacle and they began to descend. The moon rose over a shoulder of the mountain, and was reflected far below in the waters of a little lake lying in a deep pit.

They came to a low cliff, a vertical drop of about fifteen feet. A little to one side lay the lake, fed by a hundred little streams that splashed down from the heights, and finding its outlet through a narrow gorge with vertical sides. In the triangle formed by the lake, the cliff and the chasm stood a little clump of tall pines.

Two of the gang descended by means of a rope, and then Barry was let down to them.

"How in hell do we get back out of here," Roughy shouted down to him. "Suppose we get down how're we goin' back?"

"It's all right," Barry assured him. "We go on across the river an' up the other side."

Still suspicious, but hungry and tired, Roughy let himself down by the rope looped about a rock, and pulled the rope down after him.

"If you get us in a place where we can't get out," he threatened, "you best remember you're the first man what gets his."

"You're the suspiciousest damn fool I ever seen," retorted Barry.

A FIRE was lit among the pines, and the tired men flung themselves down waiting for the billy to boil, and glad of the rest.

Barry leant his back against a tree. So far he had had no success. Roughy's suspicions had kept his hands bound despite his plea of an injured knee. But it had had the effect of making even Roughy believe he was really lame.

The gang was no longer watching him closely. A dash would not be difficult. But the feat he had in mind required a man with the full use of all his limbs. The more he thought of what he intended to do the more despondent he became.

He shook himself angrily. "No use thinkin' about it," he told himself.

He looked up at the sky across which small clouds were sailing slowly. One such was approaching the moon. The moon's edge was obscured. A deepening shadow swept down. Barry got his feet under him.

He was on his feet at a bound. Jebb gave a shrill yell. Roughy reached for his gun. His bullet struck a tree.

The bushes whipped Barry across the face, roots reached out to trip his feet, but he reached the edge of the chasm in safety. He had passed that way before, and he knew that the place was bridged by a fallen pine, a mere dry pole. To cross upon it in broad daylight with both hands free was a feat requiring nice balance and a cool head.

In that uncertain light, with bound hands, with bullets singing about him, it seemed like madness. But he gave him-

self no time for reflection.

He ran on. The fallen pine swayed under his feet. Roughy burst out of cover, shooting as he came. Jebb's gun cut in a second later.

Barry felt himself tottering. He made a last desperate leap. His toes struck the edge of the chasm and he flung himself on his face. This time he really did hurt his knee, but his fall deceived Roughy for one precious moment into the belief that he had dropped into the torrent.

Roughy ran and peered down into the cleft while Barry rolled over and flattened himself beside an outcrop. He struggled furiously with his bonds, but they remained fast.

THEN Jebb saw him and pointed with a yell.

Barry heaved himself up with a groan and hobbled for the shelter of some large rocks. A bullet grazed his shoulder. He leaned back against a sharp-edged stone and sawed at the rope on his wrists. He mangled his hands, but still the rope held.

The cloud passed and again the moon shone out clearly.

Roughy, furious and raging, started to cross the fallen pine. A third of the way over his nerve failed him, and he got down hastily and straddled it, breathing heavily. But his thirst for vengeance was not quenched.

While Barry sawed away despairingly at the rope, Roughy was working his way doggedly across the frail bridge. He reached Barry's side and stood up.

The last strand of rope parted. Barry ducked down and limped toward the foot of the cliff, beating his numb hands together to bring life into them.

"Come back here or you're a dead man," shouted Roughy.

Barry wedged his shoulder under a rock and sent it crashing down the slope. Roughy saved himself by a quick spring to one side.

Jebb was now following him across the dead pine, balancing himself with outspread arms.

Barry, working like a madman, toppled a second rock and then a third. The starting of one set others in motion. The whole slope was soon covered with bounding stones of all sizes.

One of them caromed off an outcrop, bounded high into the air, and crashed down upon the trunk on which Jebb still stood. The dead pine snapped like a stick, and Jebb's last scream was quenched in the waters of the mountain stream.

Roughy pressed on up the slope, firing at each glimpse of his fleeing quarry.

Barry was trapped. Against the bare steep he had now to ascend he would present a target that could hardly be missed. There was no escape to one side or the other.

He flung himself at a leaning mass and tugged. A bullet shattered his little finger. He set his teeth and heaved with all his strength. The stone moved, rolled slowly over, gathered speed, and hurtled down the slope.

Roughy saw it coming, and dodged, but a small stone hit him on the ankle and brought him down. As he rose, a fragment as big as his head struck him full upon the temple.

There was silence. Roughy lay still and Jebb was gone. The remainder, lining the now impassable chasm, stared anxiously up the slope.

Barry's voice reached them. "Any more comin'? I got plenty rocks yet."

Marks answered him, "No, no, we don't aim to hurt you. We didn't mean to do you no harm. We just wanted in on the strike, that's all."

"It sure looks like it," commented Barry grimly. "Well, you didn't do me much harm anyway. I just got to go up over this saddle an' I'll be right with my friends on the Shindig Pass. Didn't think a poor bunch of shoats like you could put anything over on me, did you?"

"Well, we didn't mean you no harm," repeated Marks. "We didn't do no shootin'. What do you figure to do with us? How in hell are we goin' to get out of here?"

"Root hog or die, young feller, root hog or die," taunted Barry.

They heard his mocking laughter die away among the peaks. Disgustedly they looked about them at the chasm in front and the precipitous walls around them. It would take some rooting to get out of there. It was almost a perfect trap Barry had led them into.

There was a moment's silence. Then Marks, the leader of what had been Roughy's party, gave a dismayed snort.

"Crazy, is he? That feller? Yeah, he's crazy—*crazy like a fox!*"

BOOTS and BULLETS

by ROY W. ROGERS

Happy Jack was in a tight jam. He knew he couldn't save those seven pairs of new boots from Luke Hilton and his gang *with* bullets, yet he didn't know how he'd save them without bullets.

THE sun had long since sank er sunk,
The moon had rose er risen,
He slowly put his hand in her'n
An' she put her'n in his'n!"

Happy Jack Jones sang in proud and throaty tones. He wasn't perked up because he had such a wonderful voice, but rather because he was the possessor of a pair of new Buster Boots.

Now it isn't unusual for cowboys to buy new boots, but these Buster Boots were different. They were made by Uncle Joe Buster and were famed from one side of Texas to the other for their strong strength and their long wearing qualities and beauty of workmanship.

It was common for cowboys to ride

hundreds of miles on horseback to purchase Buster Boots. Happy Jack Jones had come one hundred miles in a two-horse buggy and was now ready to start the return trip. On his feet were his new boots and in the buggy were six other pairs which he was taking home to ranch companions.

"Well, take keer yoreself, Uncle Joe," he called to the aged bootmaker, who stood on the board walk in front of the boot shop.

"Same to yuh, Happy," Uncle Joe replied with a wave of his bony hand. "Be keerful yuh don't run up with that Hilton Gang. I hear they're operatin' 'round Red Dog Flats."

"Don't yuh worry 'bout me," Happy Jones laughed, patting the big forty-five on his hip, and pointing to the thirty-thirty repeating rifle on the bottom of the rig. "Long as I got this artillery I'll stand 'em off. Well, I better be trailin'. It'll take me two good days to drive in. S'long, Uncle Joe! Giddap, Hidewrack! Git a move on, Soapstick."

Hidewrack and Soapstick, a pair of sleek, fast-stepping bay horses, responded willingly to Happy Jack's command, and made the buggy wheels hum on the packed dirt of the street. At the edge of town they turned in a northwesterly direction. Following a dim road which crossed rolling prairies, they soon left behind the little town of Coulee, the place that had been made famous all over the Lone Star State by Uncle Joe Buster's boots.

It was fifty miles from Coulee to Red Dog Flats, and another fifty to Happy Jack's home ranch, the Diamond C. In making the two-day trip to Coulee, Happy Jack had spent the night in Red Dog Flats. It was his intention to make that the halfway camping place on the return trip.

Twenty-five miles out from Coulee, he stopped at a cold-water spring in the head of an arroyo. Here he made a camp in the shade of cottonwoods, fed and watered the horses, and helped himself to a dinner of sardines, cheese and crackers.

After a lay-over of half an hour he was on the road again. About four o'clock he reached the top of an unusually high ridge, from which he looked upon a country that was much more broken and wooded than that he had just passed over. In the distance, perhaps five miles away, he caught the glint of an object that he decided must be a cabin window in Red Dog Flats.

The bays took the long slope at a swift trot. Down at the foot, where the trail entered the skirt of timber, Happy Jack pulled on the lines and threw on the brake.

"Whoa, boys!" he commanded, the horses set their toes in the ground, shook their heads angrily and bit at each other.

Happy Jack gave his attention to a placard that was tacked to the trunk of a tree at the side of the trail. On the square of cardboard was printed the photograph of a dark-whiskered slit-eyed man, and in bold letters the following words:

LUKE HILTON
BANK ROBBER AND MURDERER
$1,000 REWARD
OFFERED FOR HIS CAPTURE

Happy Jack swung the horses out of the road and drove closer to the tree. The smaller print on the placard informed him that Hilton had recently robbed a bank and killed the cashier in Red Dog Flats, and that the citizens of the town had made up a purse of one thousand dollars, which would be paid for the capture, dead or alive, of Luke Hilton, said outlaw to be delivered to Sheriff Andy Starks in Red Dog Flats.

"The sun had long since sank er sunk,
The moon had rose er risen——!"

THE sound of horses hooves in the timber interrupted Happy Jack's song. With his lips still parted and his hand on his gun he turned his head and saw five men, less than twenty yards away, riding toward him. All of them were heavily armed with six-shooters and Winchesters and were mounted on gaunt, travel-worn horses. Happy Jack instantly recognized the leader as Luke Hilton.

"Go slow on that gun, pard," Hilton advised in a deep threatening voice, letting his hands rest close to his pistol as he halted his horse and watched Happy Jack.

Happy Jack took his hand from his gun and the outlaws rode up to him. In a casual manner that did not escape Happy Jack's keen eyes, they placed themselves in a circle around the buggy.

"Right nice decoration, ain't it, cow-

boy?" Hilton asked, nodding toward the photograph and grinning, his big yellow teeth showing beneath his uneven black moustache.

"Yeah," Happy Jack replied in a matter-of-fact tone, a dry smile breaking over his face. "I was just noticin' how it lit up the scenery."

Hilton's hand moved so quickly and unexpectedly that Happy Jack did not see it until the big gun was spitting fire and lead. Happy Jack's horses, unused to gunfire, leaped to run; but two of the outlaws caught their bridle-cheeks and stopped them. Happy Jack looked back at the bullet-ridden placard.

"That's what I'd do to the gent what tried to take me in," Hilton said, still grinning at Happy Jack as he re-holstered his smoking gun.

The outlaw chief rode around to the side of the buggy and looked Happy Jack and the horses over from end to end. For the second time his eyes rested on the cowboy's boots.

"Them's Buster Boots, ain't they?" he asked, shifting his keen eyes to Happy Jack's face.

"Yep, shore are," Happy Jack confessed, sensing what was coming.

"Best ever made," the outlaw mused, glancing down at his own, which were old and cracked. "Yore foot's about the size o' mine, ain't it?"

HAPPY JACK didn't reply. He knew there was no need. He knew also, that he couldn't save the boots with bullets. He might get Hilton and one of the men in front of him, but while he was doing that he would be drilled in the back.

"Pull them boots off," Hilton ordered with a sudden glare. He guessed what was going on in Happy Jack's mind.

With such heavy odds stacked against him, Happy Jack decided to obey for the present. After all, he might lose only *his* boots, as the others were under the cover behind the seat. And if he got away that easy he could round up a posse in Red Dog Flats and run the gang down.

He pulled his boots off and gave them to Hilton. Hilton dismounted, removed his boots and spurs and pulled the new boots on his feet. Putting his spurs back on and throwing the old boots out in the tall grass he remounted.

"Peaches, ain't they, boys?" he asked, holding his feet out for the inspection of his accomplices; then with a new thought he added: "Look behind the seat, Bull. This waddie may have more he's takin' home to his pals. Anyway, he may have somethin' else back there we could use. We're short on grub."

Bull, a man who got his nickname because he was so thick through the neck and chest, leaned from his saddle and lifted the cover behind the seat, Beholding the bundles he dismounted and took them out.

"Six pair," he announced, and the other outlaws grinned.

"All right," Hilton said without removing his eyes from Happy Jack. "Dress yoreselves up, boys. One of yuh tie the two extra pair on yore saddle. We'll be needin' 'em sometime."

With no little arguing over the boots, the outlaws finally got their feet dressed, and threw their old boots away.

"I been lookin' at these hosses," Hilton drawled, waving a hand at Happy Jack's bays. "I reckon we'll take 'em along, too. But before yuh unhitch 'em, boys, yu'd better relieve this waddie of his guns."

A lanky, hawk-nosed fellow reached in from behind and took the Winchester from under the seat. Bull stepped upon the axle, reached over Happy Jack's shoulder and lifted the cowboy's pistol. Another outlaw, a rat-eyed, sandy-haired runt, poked his gun in Happy Jack's side and asked for the belt of ammunition. Happy Jack removed the belt and pitched it around the fellow's neck.

"Step out on the ground, cowboy," Hilton ordered.

Happy Jack eased to the ground in his sock feet, standing a head taller than the powerful Bull. Bull felt over his clothes carefully and even looked in his hat. He took possession of the cowboy's pocketknife, pocketbook and tobacco, giving them to Hilton, who grinned broadly when he looked upon the roll of greenbacks in the pocketbook.

While Bull made the search the three other oulaws took the team from the buggy, throwing the harness upon the dashboard. Hilton ordered the buggy pushed into a deep ditch nearby and the carriage crashed down the embankment.

"How'd yuh like to walk plumb into Red Dog Flats on them there cowboy laigs o' your'n?" Hilton grinned.

"I've done worse," Happy Jack replied.

"Well, I'd like to make yuh walk it, but I ain't goin' to. I'm gonna string yuh up. That sounds better, don't it?"

Hilton realized that once this tall cowboy gained freedom a desperate battle would start. He felt secure as long as he had Humpy Bettis, owner of the Red Dog Saloon in Red Dog Flats, and his other confederates back of him; but he knew his security would be short-lived if he turned loose such a man as Happy Jack. Happy Jack must swing at the end of a rope.

"Climb on that hoss," Hilton snapped.

Happy Jack straddled Hidewrack. The bridles had been left on the bays and reins made of the lines. One of the outlaws prepared to lead Soapstick.

"Now let me give yuh a little warnin'," Hilton said, and there was a deep threat in his voice. "If yuh try to break away, we'll drop yuh in yore tracks. Just remember that—an' come along nice-like."

Hilton and Bull rode in advance of Happy Jack. The other three outlaws rode in the rear.

AT LENGTH the trail entered a narrow canyon and the riders were forced to string out in single file. Happy Jack decided that the outlaw camp was not far off, and a vision of himself dangling at the end of a rope caused him to make a sudden resolution to fight barehanded and barefooted against the five armed outlaws. They might shoot him down, but that wouldn't be as bad as hanging.

At a point where the canyon spread out enough for four or five horses to walk abreast he sprang into action. He thumped his heels against his horse's ribs and the bay leaped to the side of Bull's horse. Happy Jack and Bull tumbled to the ground. The other horses were frightened at the commotion and the riders had trouble controlling them.

Happy Jack made a good grab and caught hold of Bull's six-shooter as it was drawn. Bull pulled the trigger, but the bullet went wild.

Happy Jack clung to Bull and the gun as they rolled on the ground. Hilton and the other outlaws had their revolvers drawn, but couldn't risk a shot for fear of hitting Bull. Hilton dismounted and advanced to strike Happy Jack a blow with his gun. The struggling Bull saw what his chief was up to, and he tried to shift Happy Jack into a favorable position for a deadly blow on the head.

Happy Jack also saw what was coming, and he made a desperate move. He tumbled over, braced his knee against the ground and with the strength of a giant lifted himself to his feet, bringing Bull up with him. All of the outlaws were on one side of him now and he shielded himself behind Bull.

Hilton leaped to get around to the other side. With a powerful wrench Happy Jack gained possession of the gun and shoved Bull headlong into Hilton. The collision sent the two outlaws to the ground in a heap.

Happy Jack was left as an unprotected target for the other outlaws, but it was a chance for him to show what sort of gunman he was. Three guns spat fire and lead at him in rapid succession. He dropped down and pressed the trigger of his own gun. Two of the outlaws slumped from their saddles, their second shots going wild. The third man's second shot was more accurate, striking Happy Jack in the left shoulder, but his own chest stopped Happy Jack's fourth shot, and he tumbled beneath his rearing horse.

The exchange of shots took only a moment, and was over before Hilton and Bull could untangle themselves. Bull came up first, but dropped again as Happy Jack's last shot bored him. Hilton fired once, the bullet taking effect in Happy Jack's already lifeless left arm. The lanky cowboy leaped like a tiger, and crashed his gun against the outlaw chief's head. Hilton's knees wilted, and he sank to the ground.

Happy Jack took possession of Hilton's gun and turned to examine the other outlaws. All of them were dead, but after a short time Hilton showed signs of returning to life. Happy Jack pulled his boots from Hilton's feet and put them on. Keeping an eye on the outlaw chief, he gathered up the other boots and tied them together with a rope he took from one of the saddles.

"How's that for a show?" Happy Jack asked when Hilton finally opened his eyes.

THE cowboy was sitting on a boulder calmly smoking a cigarette of his own making. Hilton raised upon his elbow and glared blankly for a moment, then as he became fully conscious his hand darted to his empty hol-

ster. He reached next to the bosom of his shirt; but the bowie-knife he had had hidden there was also gone. He glanced around at his dead companions and seemed awe-struck as he glared at Happy Jack again.

"I say, how's that for a show?" Happy Jack continued, grinning.

Hilton did not reply. His eyes shifted to the cowboy's left arm, which had been stripped of the shirt sleeve and bound between the elbow and shoulder. Then he noticed that Happy Jack was wearing new boots, and he looked at his own feet, which were bare except for sox. He felt in his pockets and found that Happy Jack had reclaimed the pocketbook and the knife.

"How'd yuh like to walk plumb into Red Dog Flats on them bandit laigs o' yore'n?" Happy Jack asked.

Hilton scowled and looked around for the other boots. He saw them tied to a saddle.

"I oughta make yuh do it," Happy Jack went on, "but I ain't got time to fool. The quicker I git yuh into Red Dog Flats an' turn yuh over to a hangin' party, the better I'll like it."

Hilton feared what was to come. Already he had seen enough of this tall cowboy to intimidate him.

"Say, cowboy," he began in a suggestive tone, "I got a little money, an' if yuh'd turn me loose——"

"I don't need yore money," Happy Jack interrupted, standing erect. "Hop up! We gotta be on the road."

Hilton rose slowly. Happy Jack pushed him toward a horse and commanded him to mount. He obeyed, cursing the gravel that cut his feet.

Happy Jack mounted Bull's horse, and hitched Hidewrack's reins to the horn. He ordered Hilton to ride in the lead, and the trip was begun, Soapstick and the other horses following.

THE sun was an hour high when Sheriff Andy Starks came out of the Red Dog Saloon and stopped on the edge of the porch to light his pipe. A proud and throaty voice that floated down from the upper end of the street attracted his attention, and he paused with flaming match to hear the following words lifted in song:

"The sun had long since sank er sunk,
The moon had rose er risen,
He slowly put his hand in her'n
An' she put her'n in his'n!"

The sheriff stared so long that the match burned his fingers, and he threw it down with an oath. Loafers across the street at the blacksmith shop and general store sauntered over to stand with the sheriff. Somehow word reached the inside of the saloon that something unusual was coming to town, and a dozen men, including Humpy Bettis, filed out to the porch.

By the time Happy Jack halted his prisoner in front of the saloon a crowd of forty or fifty men were there to stare and gape in astonishment. Humpy Bettis had slipped back into the saloon, and Sheriff Starks stood with hand near gun.

"Howdy, sheriff!" Happy Jack called to the peace officer, waving his sound arm and grinning. "There's yore man. He stuck me up down the road, an' I obliged by layin' out his four pards an' bringin' him along to yuh."

"Say—yuh don't mean that yuh——"

The sheriff's voice was drowned by a sudden surging of the crowd around Hilton's horse. he outlaw, fighting desperately, was dragged to the ground and up the porch steps. Sheriff Starke drew his gun and blocked the way, but the gun was wrenched from him, and three men held his arms.

"Hold on, men!" the officer shouted. "Don't string him up!"

"Tuh hell with the law!" roared big Tim Blanton, brother-in-law to the cashier Hilton's gang had killed. "Yuh had yore chance, Starke, an' yuh didn't bring him in! Git a rope, somebody!"

Blanton and a neighbor friend dragged Hilton through the door. The crowd followed.

"H'st yore hands!" screeched a voice in the dimly lighted saloon. "Don't move—anybody!"

A strange stillness fell over the crowd. Many a hand was held tense, ready to pull a gun. Eyes stared to locate the owner of the voice. And as the eyes became used to the darkness they saw the hump-shouldered Bettis, a big forty-five in each hand, standing on table in the center of the room. On either side of him were too other armed men.

"Step over here, Hilton," Bettis directed, jumping down from the table.

Hilton jerked away from the men holding him, and walked over to Bettis,

who gave him one of the pistols.

"If a man moves, he's a goner," Bettis threatened, sweeping his gun over the crowd. "I've got guards all around this building."

This move on the part of Bettis was a surprise to the sheriff and the other men. Nobody had ever suspected that the saloon-keeper was a friend of the notorious Hilton.

SUDDENLY the silence was broken by the report of a gun at the rear of the saloon.

"That's one of my men," Bettis informed the crowd. "He stopped somebody from sneakin' in at the back."

Hilton and Bettis began retreating slowly toward the bar. The guards along the walls kept their guns ready for instant action. Bettis had sent three confederates after horses, which would be brought to the rear of the saloon.

"Yuh'll git what yore pard outside got if yuh come any closer," said the voice of Happy Jack Jones, who had come in through the storeroom and now stood in the door behind the bar, his six-shooter punching first the back of Hilton and then of Bettis.

Hilton and Bettis stopped as if turned to stone. They glanced over their shoulders at the cowboy who could smile in spite of a dead arm and lurking danger. The guards at the windows also turned their heads to see who the newcomer was. One of them made the mistake of tilting his gun up to fire at Happy Jack, and a bullet from Happy Jack's gun dropped him before he could press the trigger. Tom Blanton whipped out his gun, and a general rush was made toward the remaining guards.

There was just one chance left for Hilton and Bettis. That was to engage in a close gun fight with Happy Jack. They both decided on that course at the same time.

They turned, their guns popping. Happy Jack shot from the hip, and sunk a death messenger in the body of each man. He watched the outlaws slump to the floor, then eased down himself. His mind closed up, and the noise of the crowd ceased to beat upon his ears.

THE cowboy was on a clean, white bed when he came to himself. He lifted his head and saw an old doctor at his elbow, then glanced to the other side of the bed and looked into the faces of Sheriff Starks and Tom Blanton. He dropped back to the pillow and stared at the ceiling a moment.

"Any bones broke, doc?" he asked.

"Not a one, sonny," the doctor replied, "but your skin certainly won't hold water."

"How'd the show end up, sheriff?"

"Happy, the gang was wiped out clean."

"Where's my hosses an' boots?"

"Yore hosses is in my lot, an' yore boots is here in the house. The boys brung up yore buggy, an' the blacksmith fixed it up."

Happy Jack tried his arms. His shoulders were too stiff and sore to move.

"It'll be a week or two before you can use those shoulders," the doctor told him.

"*Week* er two? Say, I gotta be trailin' in. The ol' man'll be sendin' out a gang to roun' me up."

"Don't git excited, buddy," the sheriff put in. "We've made arrangements fer a man to drive yuh home."

"Drive me home? Haw, haw! I ain't no infant."

With an effort that almost brought tears to his eyes he tried to lift himself to a sitting position. The doctor gently pushed him back.

"Wait until tomorrow," the physician promised. "By that time you'll be able to ride in a buggy."

To make life look a bit brighter for the cowboy who had killed Luke Hilton, the sheriff turned to a table and brought a leather pouch to the bed.

"Here's the reward," he announced, grinning down at Happy Jack. "A cold thousand in greenback. The citizens authorized me to make the award an' to express their thanks fer the deed yuh done."

With the money in his possession Happy Jack could easily wait until the morrow to start home. And the next day, as he and Tom Blanton crossed the hill at the end of the street, leading Blanton's horse behind the buggy, the citizens of Red Dog Flats heard him singing in a proud and throaty voice:

"The sun had long since sank er sunk,
The moon had rose er risen,
He slowly put his hand in her'n
An' she put her'n in his'n!"

Them Wagon Hammer Cattle

by Stephen Payne

Author of "Herdin' Trouble," "Mavericks is Mavericks," etc.

Breck Morse ain't only good lookin'—he's also got brains. Which the same he uses on three proddy cow outfits that are fixin' to spray hot lead at each other.

BUYIN' these Wagon-Hammer cattle is Breck's idea. I don't cotton to the notion a-tall, but in less'n five minutes my pard convinces me it's the right thing to do. That's the way it always is; Breck Morse can talk me into 'most anything, even though I'm nigh onto thirty years older'n he is and always a-lookin' at the black side of things while he never seems to see anything except the silver linin'.

But then, I bet Breck could sell fur coats to the natives in Yuma. I've seen him talk the orneriest old broncs ever branded outa buckin' on a right frosty mornin', even with a frozen saddle blanket arguin' against him.

Breck's the kind of a waddie that folks who ain't never seen him afore, stops whatever they're doin' to gaze at, fixed-like. Always dressed right picturesque-like, but not to give the impression he's cheap nor loud. He's got slim hips, a trim waist and big shoulders, and an easy way of movin' that reminds yuh of a thoroughbred hoss.

When he speaks in his soft, drawly voice yuh'd think maybe he was jus' a little angel—if yuh didn't notice the little devils of mischief dancing in his eyes. But often even me, Dozey Jim Bryan, can't read them same eyes, nor tell one thing of what's goin' on in the brain corral back of 'em. I sometimes wonders

how Breck cottoned to a stiff-jointed, crooked-legged old pelican like me. But there's no accountin' for taste nor for love, as I've larnt in the fifty odd years of my life what's been spent 'most entirely on hossback.

AS I was sayin' buyin' these Wagon Hammer cattle is Breck's idea—Wagon Hammer bein' the brand on the hundred head of mixed critters—cows, bulls, steers, heifers and calves—and it's put on like a reversed "C" with a bar runnin' out from the back of it.

At the time we're driftin' north to hunt us some new range what we ain't explored, and we've got two saddle ponies apiece and one pack hoss. That animal carries our belongin's, bed, grub and camp outfits; but the little stake we've got saved up is in bills in our pockets. Howsoever, we don't camp out all of the time. Sometimes we puts up at ranches, and the Wagon Hammer looks good to us one rainy fall night.

The hombre as owns it is kinder back to the wall; no winter feed for his stock; big mortgage on said stock and the mortgagee crowdin' him hard. He wants to sell them cattle, and there ain't no one thereabouts in the market just then. You get an insight into Breck's nature when right off he sees it as our duty to buy them dogies with our little stake.

"Three thousand is this rancher's price, Dozey," says Breck to me, when we turns in that night. "Between us we've got the money. We can trail the dogies right along with us and no doubt turn 'em to somebody along our route."

I says several things, but that makes little difference. Come mornin' we parts with our three thousand, and the rancher parts with his cattle. We drives them cattle away, leavin' behind us the gratefullest little man ever I see.

THREE evenin's later, we're pokin' them dogies along at about a mile an hour gait when we comes to a wide, shallow valley. Near some leafless trees, at the foot of a rocky ridge to the east of that valley there's a little spring bubblin' out, an' right here, we proceeds to camp.

Grass is surprisingly good on this spot, and our cattle begins fillin' up t'oncet. Off to the west a little ways is the buildings of a ranch what is fenced; beyond that ranch is rollin' hills peppered with cattle; and far beyond them hills is low mountains—dark blue. The sun sinks behind 'em.

Breck unpacks our pack hoss, pickets one bronc and hobbles two others while I starts a wood fire and begins fixin' grub. I ain't no more'n got the biscuits in the ten-inch Dutch oven with its legs sawed off, than two people on hossback comes a-foggin' along from the ranch I'd noticed.

Breck's squattin' on his silver mounted spurs, rollin' a cig' as them two folks reins up, but he instanter gets to his feet and doffs his lid, for one of our visitors is a girl. Some girl, too! The yellow of the aspen leaves ain't got nothin' on such of her silky hair as shows under her soft felt hat, and rosy apples'd hunt their holes ashamed of 'emselves if they seen her cheeks.

The gent with her is young, smooth shaven, black haired. He ain't bad lookin' a-tall, but he's ate too much grub all his life and looks like he was still doin' it.

Breck's polite, "Good evenin'," is smothered by the girl's sharp, "You men are eating up our grass."

HER eyes is snappin', but in spite of that the little devils of mischief comes into Breck's eyes instanter. "I beg your pardon, miss," he drawls. "We're cowboys, but we don't eat grass. Dozey Jim is making sinkers. Won't you 'light and have some?"

The girl looks full at my pard. The flash dies out of her eyes, and she smiles. "You've a keen sense of humor, Mr. cowboy," she remarks and I breathes easier, for I knows Breck has disarmed her. But the overfed hombre with her fixes a cold eye on Breck.

"This is no time to joke, feller," he blats. "Do these cattle belong to you birds, or are you drivin' 'em through for somebody else?"

"We own 'em," says Breck and the well-fed hombre shifts in his saddle as my pard's gives him the once over. "Mighty sorry if we're trespassin', miss," Beck continues, "but we didn't come through any fence to get here, so how were we to know this land was private property?"

"Well, you see," the girl begins, not at all hostile now; but the big feller settin' his big hoss beside her cuts in.

"It ain't private property and that

point don't cut any ice," sez he, nasty. "But I am herding my cattle—the Eleven Bar cattle. I am manager of that outfit and my name is Knowlton, C. Edward Knowlton." He pauses and stares at Breck like this announcement orter make a deep impression of his 'portance.

"It must 'a' on Breck, too, for he drawls, "You're a young man to be holdin' down such a responsible job. I congratulate you."

The sarcasm scores a miss on Knowlton, and he resumes, "I'm having my punchers herd my cattle away from this particular bit of territory simply because Miss Phillips and her father need this grass for their milk cows. Now, s'pose you birds pack up and move on."

That fat-faced pasper tellin' us to move!' I'm right on the prod instanter, but as I've noted at other times, it's always best to let Breck do the talkin' when we're in a jam.

"If Miss Phillips wants us to move, why, of course—" he says; then smiles at the girl.

"Of course she does," Knowlton blusters.

"Well—I—I don't know what to say," the girl begins. "We—that is, father and I—have no stock except our milk cows. But we do need this grass—"

"Because," Knowton butts in like he's kinda hot under the collar, "the O Bar O outfit's cattle busted into the Phillips' field and ate up all their grass." He waves a hand towards the west. "See them hills yonder on the other side of this Phillips' ranch? They're peppered with cattle—O Bar O cattle—and somehow or other about two thousand head of those dogies broke the fence and got into the Phillips' field. I don't think it was entirely accidental."

"Oh, but it must have been," the girl says quick, and a becomin' flush spreads over her face. "Young Bob Carmody assured me—"

"Pardon me, Doris," Knowlton interrupts the girl again. "Let me explain the situation to these two strangers." He gazes straight at Breck and goes on, "In behalf of Phillips and his daughter I personally took up the matter with old man Carmody—old 'beef-eatin' Bob' as they call him. He owns the O Bar O and young Bob, whom Doris mentioned a moment ago, is his son."

"And I don't for a minute believe that either young Bob or his father had anything to do with flooding our field with O Bar O cattle!" announces Doris with plenty of spirit.

WHEN I talked with them about it, they both denied it." Knowlton resumes, and his manner and voice both indicates that his nose is kinder put outa joint someway. "Old Beef-eatin' Bob refused to make any settlement for the damage his stock had done. Being a neighbor of his and not wanting to break with him I did not press the matter as I might otherwise have done."

"From what you say, Knowlton, it looks like the old story of a big outfit trying to run out a little one," Breck observes. His eyes are on the girl. "What does your father think?" he inquires.

"Unfortunately, he's bitter," replies Doris. "He thinks the Carmodys fully intend to drive us from the country."

"Why do you say 'unfortunately?'" Beck inquires, right gentle and sympathetic like. Perhaps he can read more in this pretty girl's eyes than I can, but even I can tell by her heightened color and a few other things that she ain't exactly hostile towards young Bob Carmody. Hum, and where does Knowlton come in? He's herded the Eleven Bar stock away from this little patch of grass where our dogies are now fillin' up, and he's taken up the fight with the O Bar O—at least some of it—in defence of the Phillipses.

"Oh, did I say 'unfortunately'?" the girl returns, bitin' her lip. Then, after a moment. "*Any* squabble is unfortunate, isn't it?"

"We-el, yes and no," drawls Breck. "I kinda enjoy some squabbles. They reduce the monotony of life for us cowboys. But our stock is eating up all the feed you have left. We must move on. However, Miss Phillips," and he smiles at the troubled girl, "won't you and Knowlton help us eat up this chuck Dozey has got ready, and then—"

"I'd like to eat in camp," exclaims Doris. "And a few minutes more won't make much difference in what the cattle eat. Come on, Edward, let's have supper with these cowboys."

Knowlton hauls out his watch and frowns at it. "I'd rather not," he protests, kinda grumpy. "In fact, I got to be getting home. I think you'd better not stay either."

Doris Phillips swings off her pony.

"Since I've been invited I'm going to stay," she says, in that tone of voice which tells a young lady's escort he can do just as he darned pleases, but the lady has made up her mind. "If you ride back past the house you might tell father and mother."

KNOWLTON don't make any reply, unless you can call a look a reply. The one he throws at the girl is full of reproach and several other things, like he's kinda mad at her for bein' an unreasonable critter or somethin'. Beck politely urges the fellow to stay, but I can see he's hopin' Knowlton will leave. He does, but he don't go far. No, he rides out and inspects our herd of cattle powerful close-like. Ye-ah, I sees him a sizin' 'em up like he was powerful interested in the critters' brand and was thinkin' about somethin'.

Pretty quick he comes back to our campfire, where Doris is settin' on our rolled bed with a cup of hot coffee beside her and a tin plate of grub in her lap, and Breck, squattin' close to her, is forgettin' to lap up his own grub as he makes small talk. Already Breck has learned that the Phillips family bought this small ranch about six months ago, and not havin' money to stock it with range cattle, proceeded to run their little bunch of milk cows what they already owned; and how Knowlton, after his first call at the Phillips' ranch, right off said he'd have his cowboys keep the Eleven Bar stock herded off this little hunk of range lying next the Phillips' ranch.

Now Knowlton, reinin' up his big black hoss and starin' at Doris and Breck like he ain't real overjoyed at the way them two young folks is gettin' on, says gruff, "Cowboys, I know of a pasture you can rent to turn your cattle in over night, or for a week or more if you want."

I begins to say that we don't intend to stay in this country no longer'n we have to, and that we ain't no money to buy no pasture for over night even, but Breck cuts me off. Where is this pasture? He'd sure like to let our stock rest and fill up for at least a week. I'm s'prised, for it's the first I'd heard of our cattle needin' any rest, and before we camped near this Phillips' ranch Breck had been all for pushin' along as fast as possible. But then, my pard is always doin' amazin' things and maybe his interest in Doris Phillips is a heap more'n cursory.

That's a right disquietin' thought. Not but what Doris is the slickest thing ever I seen, but I don't 'zactly cotton to the idea of losin' my pard. It's plain this sorta stuck-on-hisself, swelled-up Knowlton is shinin' right up to Doris, but it is also plain she ain't a fallin' for him near as hard as he'd like, even if he has championed the Phillips' cause.

KNOWLTON says the pasture is in the foothills out west of the Phillips' ranch and is in the O Bar O range. However, he knows the bachelor what owns it and is sure we can get it. He'll pilot us to it—which is powerful kind of him—and we can make the drive about eight-thirty or nine of this same evenin'.

That suits Breck, and we packs up instanter, me not even washin' the dishes. Knowlton helps us and with our herd we circle 'round the north end of Phillips' ranch, when Doris leaves us to go home.

Quite a while after dark we arrive at the ranch Knowlton is guidin' us to. It's an isolated little valley and the hombre what owns it is a kinda hermit, named Dobbs, a whiskery, dirty old freak, but tickled to rent his pasture. While Knowlton is talkin' with Dobbs I takes the occasion to talk at Breck.

"What the Sam Hill we stickin' 'round in this country for?"

"Call it a notion of mine if you want to," says he.

"Doggone your notion. Come clean with your ol' pard."

"Dozey, the first act of a little drama I'm findin' powerful interestin' has been played. I've got a hunch there'll be a second act."

"Huh?" I gasps.

"The mystery of who flooded the Phillips' field with dogies ain't cleared up," announces Breck. "When I draw cards in a game I always like to play my hand out. Furthermore, we've got to have a squint at this young Bob Carmody. If he don't stack up no better'n this Knowlton geezer, somethin' has got to be done to keep as sweet a girl as ever I saw from makin' a fool of herself."

"Uh?" I gasps again. "Breck, yuh ain't figgerin' on meddlin' in no love affair?"

"Why not?"

Knowlton joins us at this moment and

says Dobbs will take a hundred dollars for his pasture. Breck says he'll ride to the town of Pinhorn and get the money, which causes me to stare. I don't see how he can get a hundred dollars anywhere. However, he tells me to stay with the hermit and he'll be back the followin' mornin'; and as our cattle are on good feed in Dobbs' field I should worry.

Breck and Knowlton ride away together, and me and Dobbs gets into a lyin' match which occupies us 'till bed time and then some. I spread my bed on the dirt floor in Dobbs' shack, and he crawls into his bunk, and the last wakin' recollection I has, Dobbs is tellin' me how he one time dehorned a hundred Texas steers by shootin' off their horns.

Come daybreak I'm up first while Dobbs is still snorin'. I sticks my head out the door; then follers it up with my body, and does a lot of lookin'. I can see all of Dobbs' field and there ain't a hoof of cattle in it! Breck's and my ponies—'cept the one Breck was ridin' yesterday—is there, and so is Dobbs' team and old saddle nag, but that's all the stock there is.

Pretty quick me and the hermit is investigatin' where to our cattle has gone. They ain't hard to track. They've been driven outa the field toward the south and the fence put up behind 'em. Trackin' them Wagon Hammer cattle me and Dobbs passes several little bunches of O Bar O stock, and pretty quick comes onto half a dozen head of what I know to be Breck's cattle and mine, but all has been freshly branded with the O Bar O. An expert brand reader like me can tell that brand has been run on over the top of the Wagon Hammer. I points out what's wrong to Dobbs, swears I know them dogies is ours, and he sez, "Plain! By gum, the dirty O Bar O has swiped your stock. I'll get the sheriff."

"You do it and get a whole bunch of deputies, too," I yowls. "Me, I'll do some more investigatin' and I'll meet yuh at the O Bar O ranch."

"Maybe I can't get a lot of deputies," says Dobbs, "but I can get Ed Knowlton and a lot of his cowboys."

"Jake with me," says I. "I suspect it'll take a gang to handle that Carmody layout. And, Dobbs," I says, I'll drive a few head of these fresh-branded critters right to the O Bar O where the sheriff can see the evidence. Say, you jus' fan the breeze, and if yuh see my pard tell him what's up."

I DOES some more trackin' out across the frosty hills in the dawn's early light. Plenty het up I thinks about how our money is all in this little herd of dogies and what a dirty bunch of thieves the Carmodys is. Huh, it's a cinch that young Bob ain't good enough for no girl like Doris Phillips and a cinch now that them Carmodys did flood Phillips' field with their cattle.

I hauls out my hog-leg and inspects it. It's been quite a while since I smoked up any rustlers, but I'm a honin' to do it. Presently I comes up into a canyon and proceeds cautious, thinkin' I may get into a trap. But I don't. I simply find fifty head of our Wagon Hammer cattle corralled up at the head of the canyon, nobody watchin' 'em at all. I let 'em stay and fog down across the range toward the O Bar O. On the way I find some more fresh-branded stuff and whoop twelve head to the ranch.

All this takes some time, and I ain't no more'n arrived at the O Bar O than I sees a bunch of men foggin' toward it from the general direction of Pinhorn.

As I rides up half a dozen cowboys is shoein' horses in the yards near the blacksmith shop, but pay no attention much to me as I shove my branded dogies into a corral where a fresh beef hide hangs on the fence.

In another corral with feed cribs in it is a bunch of saddle horses eatin' hay. Outside this corral is scattered saddles with their accompanyin' saddle blankets and bridles, and lookin' close I notes in that feed lot at least half a dozen hosses, sweaty and dirty, like they'd been rid durin' the night and had rolled when they was turned loose.

Off to the south of the corrals and other buildings the willow-lined stream runs toward the east, and rememberin' the set-up from my observations on the previous day I believes that on this same stream a few miles to the east is located the Eleven Bar ranch.

Outa the house comes a man I know must be old Bob Carmody. Big, blond, brawny, with a big voice. Doggone, if he started to run anybody outa the country he'd sure do it. If he started *anything* he'd finish it. I'm wantin' to hate and dislike him a heap, and I sure think I got reasons for hatin' him, but all the

same I got to respect him.

Seein' me shovin' them dogies into the corral he hollers, "Who're you and what yuh doin'?"

"You'll find out quick enough," I yelps.

"Well, I'm hopin' to find out somethin'," comes back old Bob. "Yuh're a stranger to me, but maybe you can explain how come six of my ponies in that corral was rid last night. The boys here all swear they wasn't to town nor no place."

I don't make no answer, but one of the waddies says to a young feller who comes outa the blacksmith shop, "The condition of them ponies is sure mysterious, Bob."

SO, I thinks, this younker must be young Bob Carmody. He's a sturdy, yellow-haired kid with blue eyes and a wide mouth. He's got a pair of shoulders on him like a percheron hoss, and there's somethin' about his set-up, the look in his eyes, and his manner, which is all to the good. In fact, he strikes me as a kid no prospective daddy-in-law had orter be ashamed of, and them impressions hits me all the harder 'cause I was expectin' to see a slinky-eyed, chinless jasper what'd stoop to 'most anything.

"'Tain't the only mysterious thing that has occurred lately," remarks young Bob, and the cowboys draws together with their two bosses, a-lookin' at the bunch of riders approachin'. Them horsemen thunders up and stops. One glance tells me Breck ain't among 'em, but Dobbs has sure gathered a bunch in the little time he's had. There's five fellers ridin' Eleven Bar hosses, which same I takes to be Knowlton cowboys; Knowlton is present, and Doris Phillips with a stern-eyed old gent ridin' beside her, what must be her Dad. But the feller what speaks is a long-geared, scraggly individual with a big star on the lapel of a faded coat what's too small for his shoulders.

"Carmody," says he, grim, "I understand you've been rebranding cattle that don't belong to you."

"Oh, the hell you do, Butler?" raps old Bob. "And who told yuh so?"

With his hand Sheriff Butler indicates Dobbs, and lookin' at me inquires, "You've corralled some of the animals?"

"Yep. Come look, everybody," I says.

All hands moves toward the corral. I sees young Bob tryin' to sidle up to Doris, but she tosses her head and don't seem to see him. Evidently Dobbs has told all of 'em plenty. Old Bob with some of his waddies, the sheriff and Knowlton all enters the corral and looks at the cattle I've put there.

"State the facts," says Butler to me and he's watchin' Carmody mighty close.

I STATES exactly what I had found, and then springs my biggest bombshell. "And I tracked six horses right here to this corral," say I. "I tracked 'em from the canyon, where, shut in a corral, I found fifty cattle not yet rebranded. Yes, and I'll show all you men them tracks and then I'll bet my last dollar that I can pick six horses outa this cavvy whose tracks'll match them I found."

A lot of talk follows my announcement, and old Bob blows up snorting. "This is some damned frame-up."

"Where was your men last night?" demands the sheriff.

"Right on the ranch."

The cowpunchers nods emphatic, and all says they didn't steal no cattle out of Dobbs' field nor rebrand any durin' the night. I shows everybody interested the horse tracks, and then I has some of Knowlton's cowboys rope the sweaty ponies which I picks out in the feed lot, and lead 'em out.

The tracks these sweaty hosses leaves mates them I've showed the sheriff and things is sure lookin' bad for the O Bar O.

To make matters worse for that outfit one of Knowlton's cowboys suddenly bawls out, "Hi, lookit this beef hide on the fence! It's an Eleven Bar."

Butler looks. Carmody looks. I looks, and so does Knowlton. The Eleven Bar is plain on that fresh hide. Knowlton shouts, "By George, Carmody, I didn't want to get mixed up in this, but I've got to mix in it now. So you're butcherin' Eleven Bar beef, are yuh?"

"I butchered an O Bar O," roars Carmody. "I'd like to know what the Sam Hill has taken place here!"

"I'm kinda sorry, old-timer," says Butler, "but the case is plain as the nose on your face. Carmody, you and your son and all your cowboys will have to go to jail, pending—"

"To jail?" thunders old Bob. "To jail, when we didn't—"

"Denials will do no good," announces Knowlton. "The evidence is such—" He breaks off abrupt and his mouth stays open as Breck Morse, on foot, walks around the barn and grins at everybody, amiable-like. He lifts his hat to Doris Phillips, and I'll be hanged if it ain't to her he speaks.

"Don't be frowning at young Bob, Doris," he imperturbably drawls. "I'll give you my word he's all jake."

SUCH relief as comes into that girl's eyes and shines from them I never have seen. "Do straighten out this terrible mess if you can," she cries.

"And who're you?" demands Butler.

"I thought I left you in Pinhorn as drunk as a Lord," sputters Knowlton, who for some reason has got all-fired red in the face.

"You left me in Pinhorn, but I wasn't as drunk as I let on," replies Breck. "What's botherin' yuh, Knowlton? My bobbin' up seems to kinda trouble you."

"Not at all. Not at all," jerks Knowlton, and Butler looks at him and at Breck as though sensin' somethin' goin' on under the surface he don't savvy. But he ain't no monoply on the "no savvy" business. "Did you know your cattle had been stolen by the O Bar O?" continued Knowlton.

"Ye-ah, Breck, where yuh been?" I spouts. "We got a clear case."

"Some of our cattle have been rebranded O Bar O," drawls my pard, his eyes on Knowlton, "but the Carmodys and the Carmody cowpunchers knew nothing about it."

"Keep still!" Butler roars at old Bob who starts to say several things. "Young man," to Breck, "that's a significant statement. What do you know about this business?"

"I know all about it," returns my amazin' pard. "Mighty glad to see Knowlton and all his punchers, here. It simplifies things. Sheriff, if you want to avert a gun fight just disarm Knowlton and all his cowboys right now."

"You confounded, impertinent fellow, we've nothing to fear from you," Knowlton yells. "As for discarding our guns—that is entirely uncalled for."

"Have it your own way," drawls Breck, "but remember this, Knowlton, at the first move any one of your men makes for his hog-leg I'll drill a hole between your eyes."

"Enough of this, enough!" Butler rumbles hotly. "My friend," to Breck, "you're practically accusing Knowlton and his cowboys of something."

"Yes, I'm accusing Knowlton of a lot," returns Breck. "First, I accuse him and his punchers of recently filling the Phillips' field with O Bar O cattle. Why? To set the Phillipses and the Carmodys at each other's throats for a particular reason he had. Knowlton covered his trail well but his scheme didn't work out as he figured it would, for Miss Doris Phillips failed to think as badly of young Bob Carmody as Knowlton hoped."

SPUTTERIN' and cussin' Knowlton snarls, "You confounded meddling liar! You're making up all that lie out of whole cloth. You're—"

"Keep still!" thunders sheriff Butler. "Let me handle this. An important witness has appeared, and he has the floor. Speak on, cowboy," he orders my pard.

"All right," grins Breck. "So you all can savvy it I'll state the case as I see it. You see, Knowlton's first play fizzled out on him, but he's a jigger not easily beaten. He's a fairly smart jasper with an over-supply of what I'll call cunning. So when my pard and I came along with a little herd of cattle branded with the Wagon Hammer, a brand that could be worked over into the O Bar O without any trouble, why, then Mister C. Edward Knowlton had a bright idea. He'd make tools of us two cowboys and of our cattle to gain his end, that end bein' the discrediting of the Carmody's, an' the ruination of their good reputation."

"Do I have to listen to that hound's lies and insults?" Knowlton fairly howls.

"Yuh'd better set doggoned still!" old Bob Carmody growls back at him, and Butler says to Breck, "Go on."

"In the dark of last night, Knowlton and five of his cowboys rode up the river from the Eleven Bar ranch to the O Bar O. Tyin' their horses in the willows they caught O Bar O horses out of this corral here where the cavvy is eatin' hay, and these O Bar O horses they rode to Dobbs' ranch where they ran our Wagon Hammer cattle out of the field. They rebranded as many of them as they had time to rebrand, scat-

fered those rebranded critters here and there across the range, shut the rest of the bunch up in a canyon corral, and left a plain trail back here to the O Bar O ranch.

"That trail, the rebranded cattle, the sweaty horses, would tell a convincing story to any sheriff or any cowman. But, Knowlton, you weren't quite clear enough. You overlooked several little things."

"I overlooked little things?" Knowlton hollers. "As though I, or any of my men, did any of the things you brazenly accuse me of. You haven't an iota of proof. You've not a leg to stand on."

"That's right," says the sheriff gravely. "Breck, what proof have you? Were you an eye witness to all you say occurred last night."

"No, I was not an eye witness," returns Breck and the wild hope I've been nursin' that the Carmody ain't guilty but that Knowlton is—that hope does a flip-flop on me. Gosh, if Breck didn't see what happened what can he prove?"

"From the Dobbs' ranch I rode to Pinhorn," my pard proceeds, "Knowlton with me and anxious to get me drunk, which strengthened my hunch concernin' his game. However, I didn't think anything would bust so soon and stayed in town all night. But I rode out before day light and met Dobbs racing to town. He told me the news, and I did some scouting around the vicinity of this O Bar O without showing myself."

MY PARD pauses, fastens a steady eye on Knowlton and proceeds significant, "I found an O Bar O beef hide in the river. Knowlton. It's no doubt the one for which you substituted that Eleven Bar hide now on the fence. I found where six horses were tied in those willows near the river for most of last night.

"I saw where they were ridden out of the stream and where they were ridden into it again. They came from the direction of the Eleven Bar and went back that way. And now, Knowlton, for the most important little thing you overlooked. You birds rode O Bar O ponies last night for a good reason, but cow waddies always prefer to use their own saddles and blankets, and you and your men were no exception."

There's a moment's silence in which you could have heard a cigarette paper fall.

Then Beck resumes, "Will one of you Carmody cowboys bring all of your saddle blankets up here for the sheriff to look at. Sheriff Butler, you'll find those blankets dry and free of fresh sweat—not at all as if they'd been used last night."

"Damn it, Knowlton!" suddenly shrills a small, ratty-eyed cowboy as his nerve cracks, "He's got us. Got us foul!"

This puncher yanks his gun and wheels his hoss at the same instant. "Yuh'll not catch me!" he yells. But his hoss pitches forward, fallin' hard, even as I hears a gun bark and sees a smokin' Colt in Breck's hand. The puncher is thrown clear and old Bob Carmody collars him afore he can get up. The hoss, creased but not otherwise injured, staggers to its feet a minute later.

I finds my old hog-leg in my hand and hears Butler bark, "Stand still, all of yuh!"

Knowlton and his other four men stand. Three of the Carmody waddies disarm 'em. The sheriff says, "This is going hard with you, Knowlton." Then he says to me, "That pard of yourn! My lid's off to him."

I gazes around, tryin' to locate Doris Phillips, and spies her standin' mighty close to young Bob Carmody, with her bright but misty eyes gazin' up into his. One second later his big arms goes around her.

Then Doris and Bob goes to Breck's side and they says things to my amazin' pard I don't hear. He breaks away from 'em after a minute and grabs hold of my arm. "We'll have to gather up our cattle and hit the trail," he says. "Guess we won't have any trouble gettin' straightened up with Carmody on them re-branded critters."

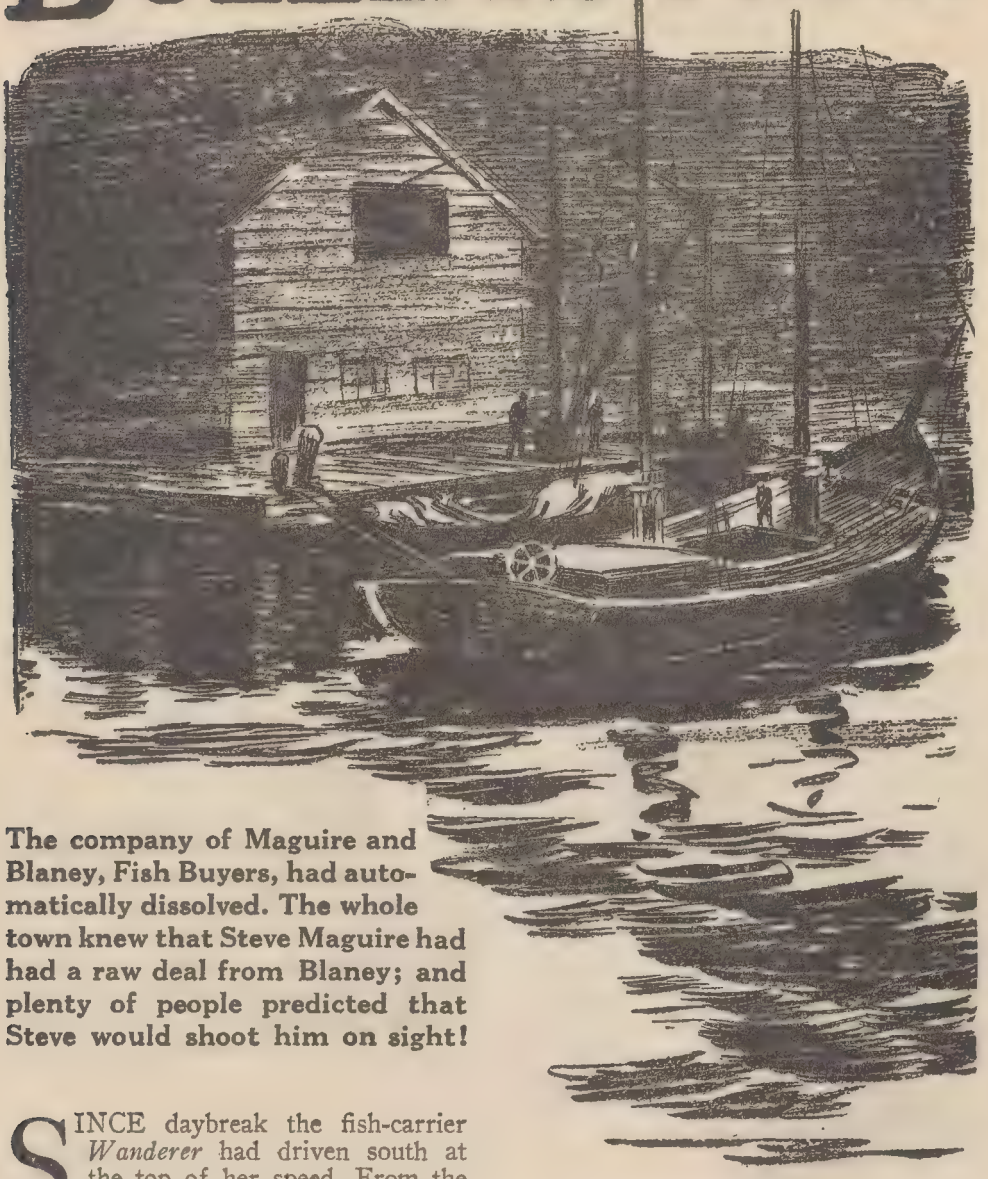
A big blond man looms up in front of us. "Trouble? Hell, no, yuh won't have any trouble with me on them dogies. I want to buy the bunch from you and I'll give you your price."

"If you do that we can pay our pasture bill to Dobbs," says I. "That bill has had me worried."

A wide grin comes over old Beef-eatin' Bob's face. "Guess I'd better give your little bunch of cattle to those kids for a weddin' present," he says. "It'd be kinda fittin', wouldn't it?"

Oct. 2-29

BULLETS FROM



The company of Maguire and Blaney, Fish Buyers, had automatically dissolved. The whole town knew that Steve Maguire had had a raw deal from Blaney; and plenty of people predicted that Steve would shoot him on sight!

SINCE daybreak the fish-carrier *Wanderer* had driven south at the top of her speed. From the trolling grounds off Cape Omnaney she had come, through Sumner Strait and along the ragged coast line of Prince of Wales Island, with urgency in the steady beat of her heavy duty motor.

Most of the time Steve Maguire had stood at the wheel, his broad shoulders hunched forward as if he would push the sturdy fifty-footer toward her destination by his own young strength. Dusk was closing the eighteen-hour Alaskan June day when he nosed the boat into her regular berth at the slip below the fish-house in Karazen harbor.

He peered anxiously up at the building's seaward wall. He was looking for the big sign, "MAGUIRE & BLANEY, Fish Buyers," which should be hanging there. He had put up the sign on his twenty-first birthday, now two years past, when he had sold his salmon-trolling boat and gone into the buying end of the business with grizzled Hance Blaney for a partner.

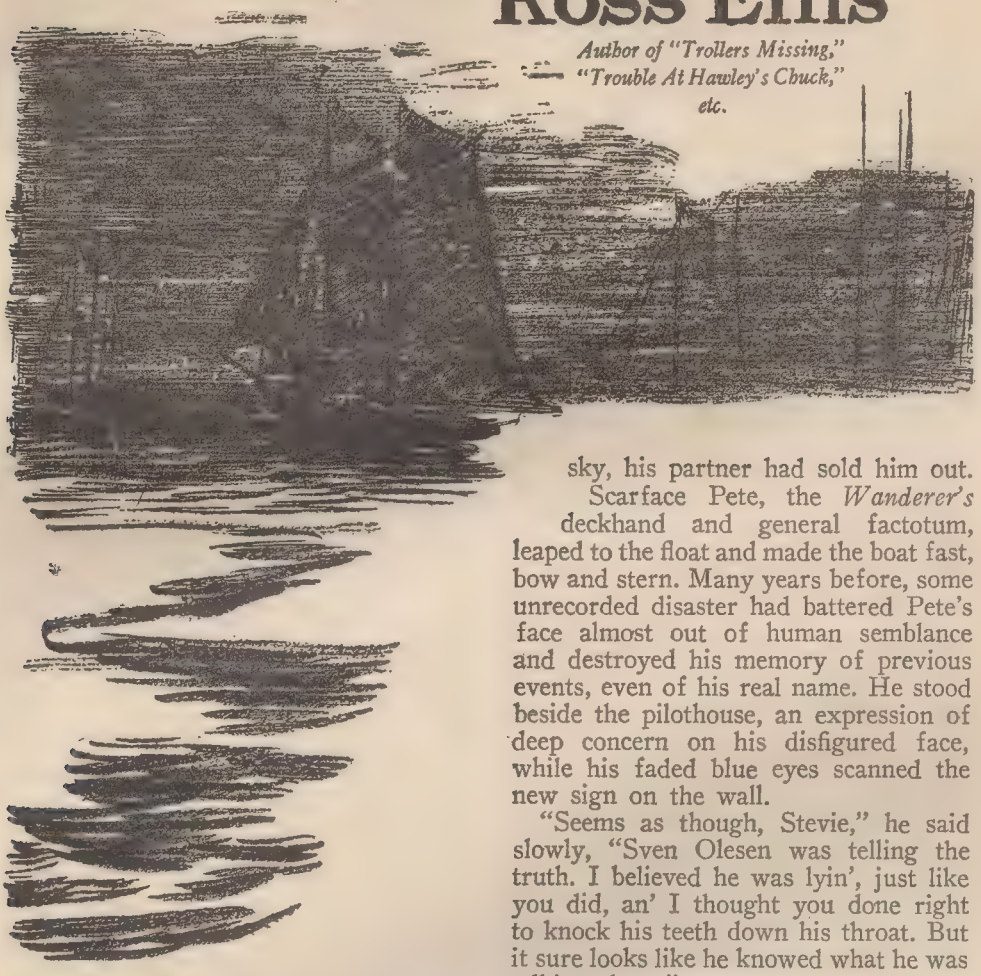
That sign meant a lot to Steve Maguire. It was the badge of his success in a lone-hand fight with the world.

THE FOG

by

Ross Ellis

Author of "Trollers Missing," "Trouble At Hawley's Chuck," etc.



It was also a banner of defiance and challenge to his stepfather, "Bull" Gunter, who had made his boyhood miserable and had virtually kicked him out to shift for himself the day after his mother's funeral, when Steve was sixteen years old.

Now he saw that the sign had been taken down. In its place was one which read: "GUNTER PACKING COMPANY."

Steve's jew set hard and his lean, aquiline features flushed deeply under the tan. It was true, then, the story that had brought the *Wanderer* racing back to Karazen across one hundred and fifty miles of sea. Without a hint of warning, like a treacherous bolt from a smiling sky, his partner had sold him out.

Scarface Pete, the *Wanderer's* deckhand and general factotum, leaped to the float and made the boat fast, bow and stern. Many years before, some unrecorded disaster had battered Pete's face almost out of human semblance and destroyed his memory of previous events, even of his real name. He stood beside the pilothouse, an expression of deep concern on his disfigured face, while his faded blue eyes scanned the new sign on the wall.

"Seems as though, Stevie," he said slowly, "Sven Olesen was telling the truth. I believed he was lyin', just like you did, an' I thought you done right to knock his teeth down his throat. But it sure looks like he knowed what he was talking about."

Steve laughed angrily.

"Something like this was due to happen, I suppose, though I'd have staked my life on Hance. I was a fool not to have made him sign over the deeds to the land and buildings at the time we made our partnership agreement. He was always going to, but he always put it off."

"You furnished all the money, didn't you, Stevie?"

"I'll say I did! Twenty-six thousand dollars that I cleaned up from that claim on Sagitat Creek, and four thousand that I'd saved. Thirty thousand against his ramshackle buildings and his experience. And now he's sold out—to Bull Gunter, of all men! If he needed money,

why didn't he come to me? Why didn't he give me a chance? I'd have raised it somehow. I'd have gone in debt for the rest of my life to keep Gunter out of this."

Scarface Pete grunted sympathetically. He knew how deep and how deserved was Steve's hatred of his stepfather. Had Hance Blaney been Steve's worst enemy instead of his closest friend and his partner, he could have done him no more cruel wrong.

Gunter was a gambler and dive-keeper, generally understood to be the Czar of the Karazan underworld. He was the reputed head of the rum-runners and drug-peddlers, and there was a rumor that he had organized and now controlled the fish-pirates who preyed on the salmon-traps.

But in addition to these devious sources of profit, he was the unquestioned leader in a far more reputable line. For years he had dominated the Karazan fish market. The Western Fish Company, which he controlled, fixed the prices that were paid the trollers, and the other buyers followed his lead blindly.

Skilfully Gunter shifted the prices, keeping them at the lowest level at which the unorganized fishermen could be induced to operate their boats. When a general trollers' strike threatened, he would raise the price sufficiently to nip the incipient rebellion in the bud, dropping it again when the immediate danger was over.

MAGUIRE & BLANEY had given Gunter the first real opposition he had received in years. Ignoring the dictator's rulings, they had based their buying prices on the market in the States for the cured salmon.

This was partly due to the fact that both partners were ex-trollers and their sympathies were with the fishermen; but even more so to Steve's determination to beat his stepfather at his own game, played with unmarked cards.

The firm had been a small but extremely irritating thorn in Gunter's side. Enthusiastically supported by the fishermen, its growth had been rapid. Steve had visioned a day when his stepfather's buying boats would be outnumbered by his own fleet. Now, through his partner's treachery, that dream was ended.

"Damn Hance Blaney!" Steve swore bitterly. "I wonder if he thinks I'll take this lying down. Pete, if I had him in my hands right now, I could choke the worthless soul out of him."

"Don't git all het up, Stevie," Pete advised. "Chances are, everything can be straightened out. Hance has been drinkin' too much, as we both know, and that prob'ly explains it all. He can't git away with anything like this, an' when he's sober he'll know it. Just take things easy until you see him."

"That's my trouble, Pete. I've been too damned easy. Hance is too old for me to manhandle; but we'll certainly have a showdown before this night is over."

Steve sprang to the float.

"I'm going up and look things over," he said. "You stay with the boat until I come back. I'll not be long."

He climbed the teredo-chewed ladder to the narrow runway along the wharf at the building's rear and unlocked a door. He entered the room where the king salmon were split, salted and packed in great tierces for shipment to the States.

Evidently business had stopped with the transfer of ownership. Even in the gloom, Steve could be sure that no salmon had been mild-cured recently. The long tables were dry, and the condition of the floor showed that it had not been sluiced down for many hours.

There was a light in the little office at the front of the building, which faced the street. The door which led into the salting-room was closed, but the gleam of the electric light showed through its glazed upper quarter.

A murmur of voices came from the office; a pleading mumble, interrupted by a bellowing laugh which ended in a queer squealing note.

Steve recognized the laugh. It was the bovine bellow that had given Bull Gunter his nickname. He moved forward quietly and paused just outside the office door, struggling to get a grip on his temper. If the other man within that room was Hance Blaney, he wanted to be calm and cool.

"It ain't enough, Bull," whined the pleading voice again, "I did de job right an' proper, didn't I? Sure, I did. Well, den a coupla grand'd be low pay."

The voice was strange to Steve. He took another forward step and looked

through the glass of the door.

In the swivel chair which had belonged to Hance Blaney was the burly form of Bull Gunter. He was a stalwart man in his late forties, thick-shouldered, powerful, of tremendous vitality. His face, with its close-cropped mustache, hard jaw and frosty eyes, might have been hewn from granite. He looked like a ruthless man; and he was one. Now he wore an amused grin.

On the other side of the battered oak table was a spiderish little man of indefinite age with a thin, pallid face under a mop of tow-colored hair. He was watching Gunter with an air of desperate intensity.

"Ya can't hold out on me dat way, Bull. I won't stand fer it. Come across!"

There was a warning snarl in the last words, an unmistakable threat.

Gunter's grin disappeared like a sun in eclipse.

"I run this racket, Whitey," he said in a hard voice. "You've been paid all a shrimp like you is worth. I'm sick o' listenin' to your yap. Get to hell out o' here! Move!"

The little man moved with amazing swiftness. With an inarticulate cry he flung himself across the table, steel flashing in his hand. But, quick as he was, Gunter was ready for him. Like the pounce of a cat his huge bulk was up out of his chair, and his hand clamped on Whitey's wrist. He wrenched once, and the knife tinkled to the floor. The other hand gripped the little man's throat, whirled him down on the table and began a brutal throttling.

Steve knew nothing of the rights or wrongs of the quarrel; but where Gunter was concerned, there could be no doubt as to where his sympathies lay. Unhesitatingly he went into action on the side of the under dog.

He flung open the door, and as he charged into the office his fist lashed out to Gunter's jaw. The big man, caught off balance, toppled to the floor, overturning his chair as he fell. Whitey slid from the table, cast a wild-eyed glance at Steve, and scuttled out of the office, both hands clutching his bruised throat. There was a crash as he blundered against an empty fish-tierce in the dark salting-room, then the slam of the door leading to the wharf.

Steve stood over Gunter, fists clenched. The big man glowered at him from the floor. Watching him, Steve recalled the bitter years of his boyhood in which this man, his nominal protector, had been a figure of terror to whom he gave hate for hate.

WHILE Steve was still too young to remember, his father had been killed by the collapse of a mine tunnel, up in the Lake Atlin district. One of his two partners, a man named Jack McCane, had been buried with him under thousands of tons of rock.

Gunter, the surviving partner, had brought Maguire's widow and her infant son out of the wilderness. While she was still dazed and apathetic from the shock, he had married her.

When she recovered full possession of her faculties and realized what she had done, she was horrified, for Gunter had secretly annoyed her for weeks before the accident. She devoted herself to Steve, whose likeness to his father became striking as he grew older. Gunter hated the boy with a venomous intensity, and vented his spite in a hundred cruel ways.

They had seldom met in the seven years since Steve had left Gunter's roof. The last occasion had been shortly after Steve had entered the buying field as his stepfather's competitor, and they had then clashed violently.

But it had been merely a verbal clash. This was their first physical encounter since the days when Steve was a lanky, undeveloped boy at the mercy of a brutal tyrant.

"You'd like to beat me up the way you used to, wouldn't you, Gunter?" Steve said vindictively. He flexed his strong young arms. "Well, it would be too big a job for you now. Or maybe you don't think so. Maybe you'd like to get up and take a chance."

Gunter grinned with the specious geniality that Steve remembered so well, though there was no mirth in his frosty eyes.

"The battle's over, kid," he said with apparent amiability. "But stand back a bit. I'm goin' to get up, just the same." He heaved himself to his feet. "I was expectin' you, but not so sudden nor so violent." He raised his right hand and touched his jaw gingerly.

"I've not started to get violent yet," Steve snapped.

The hand that caressed Gunter's jaw moved swiftly, and a heavy revolver was pointed straight at Steve's belt buckle.

"Don't start then, you whelp!" Gunter snarled, the grin gone. "Not many men have walloped me an' stayed healthy. Don't crowd your luck. Got a gun on you?"

Steve shook his head, too angry to speak.

"I believe you, o' course, but let's make sure. Throw open your coat. You might be wearin' a shoulder-holster too, an' had forgot about it. All right, I see you ain't. Set down over there if you want to talk to me. An' don't make any queer moves."

Still silent, Steve dropped into the chair which Whitey had recently occupied. Gunter slipped the revolver into a holster that swung under his left arm, straightened the overturned chair and sat down.

"Well, get a load off your chest, my young Napoleon of commerce," he jeered, with a partial return of his amiable manner. "You got some questions you want to ask, I reckon. I'm a busy man, but I'll listen to 'em. Answer 'em, maybe."

"Why is your sign on my fish-house?" Steve threw at him. "What the devil are you doing in my office? Where's Hance Blaney?"

Gunter grinned at him.

"You're bluffin', Maguire. You know perfectly well that the title of these buildings an' everything in 'em was in Blaney's name. He got in a jam an' sold to me, as I have the documents to prove. I don't know where Hance is now. Prob'ly he's stickin' close to home, tryin' to sober up. I ain't seen him since he give me a bad check last Thursday."

"What's that!" Steve ejaculated.

"I said he give me a bad check. Want to see it?"

Tight-lipped, Steve nodded. It seemed incredible that Blaney's check should be dishonored by the bank. Hance kept no private account, nor did Steve. They drew against the firm's balance for cash as they needed it. Ten days before, when Steve had left Karazan for the first trip of the season to the trolling grounds, the bank balance had been slightly over twenty thousand dollars.

From an inside coat pocket Gunter produced a note-case and extracted a slip of paper which he tossed across the table. Steve's bleak eyes scanned it. The check was for one thousand dollars, made payable to Gunter, and it was signed in Hance Blaney's familiar scrawl: "Maguire & Blaney." Across its face the bank had stamped in large black letters: "N.S.F."

STEVE raised his head and stared into Gunter's eyes.

"How did you work it?" he asked evenly. "I'll find out, you know. You might as well tell me."

"You better ask Blaney."

"I will. But right now I'm asking you."

Gunter's cold eyes narrowed. He appeared to cogitate.

"I guess it's no secret," he said after a moment. "Hance has been on the loose for a week. He tangled up in a poker game in my 'Trollers' Rest,' an' had hard luck. Kept cashin' checks for two days an' nights. When he was broke, I made him an offer on this prop'ty, an' he took it. Then he lost what I paid him for it. After that was gone, he still wasn't satisfied. Thought he could get it all back if he had another chance. Said he had to, or you'd skin him alive when you got back. Wanted me to let him have a thousand more. Promised that the bank would make his overdraft good. But it didn't, you see. You tell him that I ain't goin' to push him for it. He don't need to keep out o' my sight on that account. I'll give him a reasonable time to pay up."

"Yeah?" Steve laughed in ironic amusement. "That's kind of you, Gunter."

The big man eyed Steve with calculation in his gaze.

"You'll be takin' a shot at Blaney when you meet up with him, I reckon. Nobody'd blame you."

Steve said nothing. The suggestion rhymed with his own thought. Blaney deserved death. But even more so did this leering scoundrel who had ruined him.

"If it comes to that," Gunter went on insinuatingly, "Don't forget I got a lot of pull in this town. I never liked you; never pretended to. You were a stubborn, ungrateful boy, an' you've raised hell with my business since you growed up; but I'm sort o' sorry for you now. If you want to let bygones be bygones, an' throw in with me, I'll

protect you, no matter what you do to Blaney. I'll see to it that you make plenty o' jack, too."

"How?"

"All you got to do is foller my orders."

"Join your gang of crooks? Gunter, you've got a hell of a nerve!"

Gunter laughed his great bellowing laugh with its squealing climax.

"You're dead right I got nerve, Maguire. That's why I'm a good man to tie up with. A number o' handy lads have found they can make important money by doin' what I tell 'em. Think it over."

"I'm thinking it over," Steve said.

Outwardly calm, he was angrier than he had ever been in his life. He leaned forward, the dishonored check in his hand.

"You're too fast for me, Gunter. Looks like the firm of Maguire & Blaney has some debts I've got to pay before I can take on anything new. I can't square everything tonight, but I'm going to give you something"—he lunged across the table and caught the gambler's right wrist, blocking the swift draw—"something on account!"

With the last word his fist smacked home on the big man's jaw for the second time that night.

Gunter had thrown himself backward at Steve's first aggressive move, and the blow did little more than accelerate the motion. The chair and its bulky occupant crashed down. Steve, still clinging to the gang leader's gun hand, was jerked across the table's top. The telephone went hurtling into space. It fell with a thud and Steve felt Gunter's wrist go limp.

Steve swung his legs to the other side of the table and slipped off, still retaining his hold. Gunter lay inert, eyes closed, blood oozing from a cut over his temple where the heavy base of the instrument had struck him in its fall. Steve knelt beside him.

APPARENTLY the man was unconscious, but this might be a sham. Cautiously he thrust a hand under Gunter's coat and drew the revolver from its holster, then released the gambler's wrist. The arm dropped limply.

He could see the beat of the pulse in Gunter's neck, sluggish but strong. He pressed his fingers on the contused spot where the telephone had struck. Gunter groaned feebly and rolled his head away from the pressure. The man was not far from consciousness, Steve thought. He stood up, feeling little satisfaction with his fluke victory. It was pointless, had accomplished nothing.

The thought that the business to which he had given all he had and on which he had built so many dreams should fall into the hand of his enemy, had driven him to fury. Now his hot rage had burned out, and he was weary and depressed.

He glanced about the familiar office with the thought that he would probably never set foot in it again. The dishonored check lay on the floor, beside it the knife which Whitey had dropped. Steve picked them up.

He examined the knife curiously. It was a distinctive weapon. The narrow blade was set in a guard of chased silver, the handle of carved ivory with a grinning death's-head at the end.

The check he slipped in his pocket. He hesitated a moment, then drew out a bill-fold. It contained a little more than twelve hundred dollars, all that remained of the money he had taken with him on his fish-buying expedition. From this he slowly counted out one thousand dollars. He laid the bills on the table, weighting them down with the dagger, to which he added Gunter's heavy forty-five caliber revolver.

"Here's something more on account that you'll probably like better," he addressed his fallen adversary. "You'll think I'm a fool to pay for this check when I could just as easy steal it. Probably that's true, too. Anyhow, you'll see that I'm not a likely recruit for your gang."

Gunter neither answered nor stirred.

II

SCARFACE PETE was waiting anxiously when Steve descended the ladder to the float and climbed aboard the *Wanderer*.

"Well, Stevie?" he questioned.

"It's a long way from being well," Steve told him. "When Hance got started he went the whole distance." He gave Pete a brief account of what had happened.

Pete growled deep in his throat and shook a gnarled fist at the building that housed Bull Gunter.

"I'll take yer case in hand myself, some day," he muttered. "Some day, when my memory comes back." He turned to Steve. "It's a queer thing, Stevie," he said in a puzzled tone, "but I keep a-thinkin' I've got even more reason to hate Bull Gunter than you have, if I could just remember, though the man's never done nothin' to me, s'far as I know. In dreams it comes to me, all clear an' fine. I know who I am an' how I got smashed up this way. Seems as if Bull Gunter's responsible, somehow. But when I wake up it's gone. Lordy, I wish I could remember!"

"He's got enough to answer for without digging back as far as that," Steve said bitterly. "What he's done to Hance and me is plenty."

"You'll be lookin' up Hance now, I reckon," Pete suggested.

"I'll look him up, all right," said Steve with a grim laugh, "but the first thing I want to do is to move to another berth. This boat and the twenty-odd thousand pounds of fish aboard her are all I have left. I can't take chances on what damage Gunter might do, if we left her here for the night."

While Steve started the motor, Pete cast off the mooring lines. The *Wanderer* backed away from the slip and headed up the channel toward the public dock, which was patrolled by a watchman. The boat could lie there safely. In the morning, Steve thought, he would have to sell his fish for what he could get, turn that perishable asset into cash. He was certainly no longer in a position to pack them himself.

And this meant, Steve thought with a bitter smile, that he was once more practically at Gunter's mercy. None of the other buyers would risk antagonizing the dictator by paying more than the price he fixed—if, indeed, he permitted them to buy the fish at all.

"I wish there was some way of getting rid of our cargo tonight," Steve said to Pete. "We may be black listed tomorrow."

"We got plenty o' ice," Pete said. "The fish will be all right for a couple more days. We could run to Prince Rupert with 'em, maybe beat the Karazan price."

"Only as a last resort," Steve told him. "I'd rather take a stiff loss than leave Karazan right now."

It was a moonless night, and the starshine which gleamed from the snow-capped peaks that towered behind the slope to which Karazan clung was slowly being obscured by fog. Few boats were moving about the waters of the harbor, though along the wharves many lay silent and dark.

Lights showed on the receiving dock of the Western Fish Company. A long craft was moored there, evidently having just come in, for men were moving about her deck.

Steve recognized her. It was the *Goshawk,* one of Western's own buying boats, back from the trolling grounds with a cargo. On sudden impulse, Steve ran the *Wanderer* alongside her.

"What you goin' to do, Stevie?" Pete asked.

"I'm going to try something that may work," Steve chuckled. He hailed the *Goshawk's* skipper, Pat Maloney.

HEY, Pat! Unloading tonight?"

"I'll tell the world I am. Got some kings aboard that need attention damn sudden, if we're goin' to save 'em. I've sint a boy to telyfone the fish-house boss to come down an' take 'em in."

"How'd you like to buy some fish, while you're waiting for him?" Steve asked. "I have better than ten tons of kings, mostly mild-cure reds. I'm not a buyer any more, you know."

Maloney groaned in commiseration. He was one of the few of Gunter's employes who dared to be openly Steve's friend.

"I know, boy. I heard about it. I wudn't ha' believed it o' Hance. He hit the bottle too hard at times, 'tis thrue, an' a bould gambler he always was; but I t'ought he was square. Bull Gunter druv him crazy wit' his pizen licker, belike. Thot's the dirty sculpin' I'd take wan good crack it, if it was me."

"I've already done that little thing," Steve said, and immediately regretted his speech.

"Hurroo!" yelled Maloney. "Billy! Mike! Come here wance!" The engineer and deckhand of the *Goshawk* rushed to the rail. "Didn't I tell ye that Stevie Maguire wud give Bull Gunter his needin's? Well, me lads, he's done it a'ready! An' Bull wit' a gun on him, I make no doubt. An' Steve tuk it away from him an' knocked him out wit' his bare fists. Ain't that the way of it, boy?"

Steve saw that he might as well tell them the truth and forestall the lurid tale that the garrulous Celt's imagination would manufacture. He did so.

"The telyphone *fell* on him, ye say!" Maloney guffawed, when he had finished. The other members of the *Goshawk's* crew grinned at each other.

"You heard me," Steve said; but he knew they did not want to believe him. That born dramatist, Pat Maloney, would paint a picture of an epic struggle, with just enough basis of truth to make flat denial impossible. Over the far-flung reaches of Alaska's salmon waters the story would go, welcomed by the trollers, for Steve was popular among them.

He shrugged his shoulders and made no further protest.

"Well, Pat, what do you say about the fish?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll buy 'em. Why wudn't I? 'Tis me business to buy."

"It may get you into trouble with Gunter," Steve warned him. "He's out to ruin me, you know. I'm probably on the blacklist with every buyer in Karazan; but if you haven't been given notice——"

"Say no more, boy," Maloney interrupted, with a wide grin. "I have orders to buy all king salmon offered, an' meet the prices you pay whin our boats are in the same wathers. Bull Gunter so instructed me whin I started on this thrip. I shall obey orders, though they drive owners crazy wit' rage whin they hear about it. An' of throuble wit' Bull Gunter shud come of me action, 'tis no matter. I have long felt shame that I draw pay from thot man. 'T'wud be a joy to be fired for such cause."

BY THE time the sliding doors in the building above them opened, evidencing the arrival of the fish-house boss, Steve's fish were aboard the *Goshawk;* and stowed in various pockets was currency amounting to nearly five thousand dollars. He had sold his fish for exactly what he had paid for them on the grounds. His only loss was the cost of operating his boat.

A hoist swung out from the fish-house and the business of unloading began. Steve climbed over the *Goshawk's* deck, when the work was well under way, and went up the ladder to the street level.

Brock, the fish-house boss, stood on the wharf, watching the gleaming salmon rise from the *Goshawk's* hold. He was a hard-bitten, competent-looking man of middle age, one of Gunter's chief lieutenants in the business.

"Well, Maguire, what can I do for you?" he inquired briskly, as Steve approached.

"You can tell me what price you'll pay for kings," Steve said. "I brought in better than ten tons on the *Wanderer.*"

"You'll find no market for them in Karazan," Brock told him, with evident relish. "That's the order from headquarters."

"Blacklisted, eh?" Steve commented. "Well, I expected it. Take a message back to headquarters for me, will you?"

"Yes, but it won't do you any good."

"It'll give me a lot of satisfaction. Tell Gunter that I've already sold my fish and got paid for them." He patted his bulging pockets. "I think it will make his headache worse."

Steve turned and started for the ladder.

"Hold on," Brock called. "I heard Maloney talking a few minutes ago. Is it a fact that you had a fight with Gunter tonight and knocked him out?"

"Something like that," Steve admitted.

"Why, you young hell-cat! You'll be looking for Blaney now, I suppose, with blood in your eye. What you going to do with him—beat him up, or shoot him?"

"Neither one," Steve said angrily. "I'll have a talk with Hance and get at the real inside of this affair. You can add to your message to Gunter that I say he has overstepped himself this time. There are limits to what he can get away with, even in Karazan."

He flung down the ladder and went aboard his boat, impatient with himself for having yielded to the impulse to taunt Gunter with the sale of his fish in the face of the blacklist. It was a childish thing to do, he thought.

He found Scarface Pete asleep on a locker in the pilot-house. As Steve entered, the deckhand roused and sat up, his faded blue eyes misty with dreams. His disfigured face was radiant.

"Stevie, I remember!" he cried. Then a blank look came over his battered features. "It's gone," he said unhappily.

"A second ago I knew my name, an' everything that happened before I got hurt. There was important things, Stevie—things it seems I just got to remember. But they're gone now. I'm dumb old Pete again, with no name, no nuthin'. Stevie, what do you know about Bull Gunter before he come to Alaska?"

"Not very much," Steve answered, patiently but rather absently. Pete's struggle to regain his memory had become an old story. "He was born somewhere in Ohio, I believe. He and Jack McCane and my father met in San Francisco, in the year 1900, I think, and came up here, as partners, to look for gold. Dad was certainly a fine man, and Mother said Jack McCane was too. How they ever got mixed up with a skunk like Gunter is beyond me. Dad married Mother in Juneau in 1903, and took her to the mine. I was born in the cabin there; and about a year after that the tunnel caved in, and Dad and McCane were killed. You know what Gunter done since then. And I've told you all this a dozen times, Pete."

Steve had met Pete at a trollers' camp in Scowl Arm several years before. The scarfaced man, who had a little gasboat of his own, had come aboard Steve's boat for an exchange of gossip. Thereafter, for no apparent reason, he had attached himself to the young fisherman with the enthusiasm of a masterless dog for a friendly stranger. From camp to camp he had followed Steve, his devotion at times rather embarrassing.

When the firm of Maguire & Blaney was formed and the *Wanderer* purchased to serve as a buying boat, Pete moved aboard and announced that he was the crew. He was a good man, as he soon proved. Despite his lost memory and his wrecked face, his body was strong and his brain keen on all current affairs.

Pete's struggles with his affliction never failed to awaken Steve's sympathy. But on this night he had other things, far more pressing, to think about. His showdown with Hance Blaney was still to come.

III

LEAVING the *Wanderer* moored to the float at the public dock, with Scarface Pete sleeping aboard, Steve walked slowly toward the flat in Chickamin Street. Fog had drifted in, obscuring the stars, and the few street lights shone dimly.

Half an hour later he turned into a short street and stopped before a two-story building, a stone's throw from the waterfront. The lower floor had formerly been occupied by a ship chandler, but was now vacant. Above were the five rooms which the partners had shared since the beginning of their business venture.

The windows were dark, but at that hour it signified nothing. Blaney would be there, Steve was confident. He dreaded the talk that lay ahead. He had an impulse to go to the hotel for the night, so postponing the unhappy meeting.

He shrugged his shoulders. Better to get it over with, if only in mercy to Hance. It must be agony to lie there, sleepless, awaiting the coming of the man he had betrayed. Steve stepped into the entry from which a stair led to the upper floor. As he did so he felt, rather than heard, a movement in the blackness.

Instinctively he ducked and threw up a shielding left arm. It received a numbing blow which had evidently been aimed at his head as he stood outlined in the doorway. At the same instant Steve lunged forward and his right fist impacted against his assailant's body. There was a grunt of pain, a swishing sound. Something struck Steve violently on the head. He went to his knees, half stunned, and another blow crumpled him to the floor.

Somebody knelt beside him, pawing his clothing. He tried to struggle, but his muscles would not respond to his will. He felt himself flipped over on his face. A knee was pressed into his back, while a hand explored his hip pockets.

Light flashed on the stair. A familiar voice shouted. The narrow enclosure reverberated to a heavy explosion, echoed by another. There was a crash on the landing above, a groan. The weight was lifted from Steve's back, and he heard the patter of running feet.

He rolled over and for a few moments lay panting, dazed. Strength flooded back into his vigorous young body. He got to his feet and cast a glance up the stair.

Down the worn linoleum which covered it crawled a sinister trickle, black in the light which streamed from the

flat's open doorway. A form lay sprawled on the landing.

"Hance!" Steve called. A low moan answered him. He leaped up the stair and knelt beside his partner.

Old Hance wore the gaudy pajamas which Steve had given him the previous Christmas. There was a hole through the pocket on the left breast, and the widening pool of blood in which he lay indicated that the bullet had passed entirely through his body. His deeply-lined face was ghastly under the stubble of gray beard which told of days of self-neglect.

His eyes opened as Steve bent over him. He smiled faintly.

"Hello—Steve," he breathed. "Guess—I—got—mine." The words came in choking gasps.

"Don't you believe it, partner!"

Steve picked up the limp form, carried it into the flat and laid it on the bed from which Blaney had evidently sprung at the sound of the struggle in the entry. He examined the wound. A bullet of large caliber had entered just above the heart. Ranging upward and to the right, it had torn its way out, leaving a ragged hole between the shoulder blades.

With water and towels hastily taken from the flat's small bathroom, Steve cleansed the wound and applied cold compresses until the flow of blood was reduced; then he swathed the body in bandages torn from a sheet. Blaney was unconscious, breathing hoarsely. Help beyond Steve's skill was urgently needed.

He went to the telephone and called Dr. Shelton. Shelton's reputation was not of the best, as he was a sporting character whose practice was largely drawn from the underworld; but his office and living quarters were located only a few blocks away.

SHELTON answered the phone at once, wide awake and alert, though it was after midnight and Steve had thought it likely that the physician would be in bed. He questioned Steve closely regarding the nature of the wound and the manner in which it had been received. Yes, he would come, he promised at last. He had an office case, but he'd be through with that in a few minutes. A doctor led a dog's life, he grumbled. In half an hour, more or less, he'd be there.

Steve went back to the wounded man. His eyes were open, his lips framing words. Steve bent over him, straining to catch the labored speech.

"Whisky—in medicine chest——"

Steve found the flask and held it to the pallid lips. Old Hance swallowed chokingly and lay gasping for breath. His eyes brightened and a faint color showed in his cheeks.

"You'll be all right, old-timer; take it easy until the doctor comes," Steve told him.

"No, I'm done an' I know it." The voice was stronger now. "Not many minutes left, Stevie. Who shot me?"

"Somebody who was trying to rob me. Didn't you see him when you fired?"

"Saw nothin'. Bullet was in me. I shot blind." He choked and there was blood on his lips. "Stevie, listen——"

"Don't try to talk," Steve urged.

"Got to, while I can. I didn't mean to sell you out, Stevie. I don't remember signin'—all those papers an' checks. Was drinkin' a little—not much—playin' poker with Bull Gunter,—Doc Shelton—Brock—Red Pollock——" He lay quiet for a moment, then the feeble voice raised again.

"Lost a bit—cashed one check—was winnin', last I knew—— Woke up two days later—same room. Gunter showed me checks an' papers—said I'd signed." He raised himself on an elbow. "I don't remember doin' it, I tell you, Stevie! I've gone nigh crazy, thinkin' about it. You believe me, Stevie?"

"Sure, I believe you. I know you didn't mean to do it. You were drugged, or something. I don't know how they worked it, but we'll make 'em hard to catch when you get well. Lie down now, Hance, and keep quiet. I think the doctor's coming."

There was a sound of feet on the stair. Steve threw open the door to illuminate the landing. The light shone on Blaney's revolver which lay on the bloodstained linoleum where he had dropped it as he fell. Steve picked it up. As he did so, he heard a strangled cry from his partner.

He whirled and darted to the bedside. Old Hance lay limply, blood oozing from his mouth. Steve gave one glance and turned to the door. A short, stocky man carrying a small black bag was entering.

"Here, Doctor," Steve called "Quick!"

Dr. Shelton delivered his verdict when he was half-way across the room.

"No use. This is a case for the coroner."

He bent over the body and made a perfunctory examination. Steve watched him silently, a hard lump in his throat.

THERE was little hope of recovering anything from the ruin which Blaney's weakness had wrought. Drunk or sober, remembered or forgotten, the checks had been signed and cashed and the money was gone. Gunter would not have taken possession of the buildings so boldly without papers to prove his ownership. It was a frame-up, of course, at whose details Steve could only guess, yet the effect was the same as though Hance had deliberately betrayed him.

Still, Steve felt no bitterness toward the dead man, only profound sorrow at his passing.

"Yes, he's dead. And no wonder, with a hole like that in him." The stocky doctor straightened up, wiping his hands briskly on a corner of the sheet. "That the gun you shot him with?"

Steve's head came up with a jerk.

"Eh? What's that?"

The doctor indicated the weapon in Steve's hand. It was a four-fifty-five Colt, New Service, one of a pair which Blaney had owned for several years.

"I'm assuming that's the gun you shot Blaney with," he said. "Perhaps you'd better let me take it." He stretched out a hand officiously.

Steve drew back, frowning.

"It seems to me you're assuming a whole lot, Shelton," he said. "This is Blaney's gun. I picked it up on the landing while you were climbing the stair. What's the matter with you, anyhow? I told you over the phone that Hance had been shot by a thug who was robbing me in the entry-way."

"That still your story?" asked the doctor with a skeptical grin.

"Of course it is. It's the truth."

"Oh, come now, Maguire," the doctor laughed. "That's a poor line to take, and it'll never get by. The whole town knows that Blaney gave you a raw deal, and trouble has been expected. Plenty of people have predicted that you'd shoot him on sight. Why don't you tell me exactly what happened? Maybe it isn't as bad as it looks."

"I've told you what happened," Steve retorted angrily. "If I'd shot Hance, I'd hardly have bandaged him up and called a doctor, would I?"

"Why not, when you were sure he'd be dead before a doctor could arrive?"

"Look here, Shelton," Steve cried. "What are you trying to do—make me out a murderer?" He glared at the cynical-eyed little physician with bitter indignation and dislike.

"I'm trying to make you see that your best line is to admit the killing and claim justification. Hance probably attacked you, or you thought he was going to, and you shot him in self-defense. Claim that, anyhow, and you'll have a good chance to get off. If you stick to this bandit story, they'll hang you. Deputy Hallam will be here soon, and you'd better——"

"Did you telephone Hallam, Shelton?" Steve interrupted in a dangerous voice.

"I certainly did," said the doctor stoutly. "Your story sounded phoney to me—just as phoney then as it does now. If you can't think up a better one than that, my advice to you, as a physician, is to take your foot in your hand and make your getaway before the deputy arrives. A change of scene will prolong your life. I can't stop you. Nobody would expect me to. You have a gun, and you've proved your willingness to use it."

"Damn you, Shelton!" Steve cried furiously. "If you think you can——"

HE PAUSED as footsteps again sounded on the stair. They stopped for a moment just outside the flat's open doorway. Then into the bedroom strode an angular, stoop-shouldered man whom Steve recognized as Deputy U. S. Marshal Tom Hallam. He was by no means the most efficient of the three deputies stationed at Karazan.

Hallam's slightly protruding pale blue eyes swept over the scene, coming to rest on Steve. He jerked his head toward the quiet figure on the bed.

"Dead?" he inquired in a deep bass voice.

"As Julius Cæsar," the doctor spoke up. "I predicted that, you know, Hallam."

The deputy nodded solemnly.

"You do it, Maguire?"

"I certainly did not."

"Well, then?"

"When I got here," Dr. Shelton volunteered, "Blaney was dead, and Maguire was flourishing that gun."

Steve whirled on him.

"Fourishing——" he choked. "Why, you——"

The deputy moved swiftly between the two.

"Let's see that gun," he ordered. He took it from Steve's unresisting hand, threw out the cylinder, snapped it shut again. "One shot fired," he commented. "Well, Maguire, if you didn't shoot Blaney, why don't you say who did?"

"I've already told this officious ass all I know about it," Steve said angrily. "I was blackjacked and robbed at the foot of the stair. The noise of the rumpus brought Blaney out on the landing with this gun in his hand, and somebody shot him before he could go into action. He returned the fire as he dropped, shooting blind. He told me that he didn't see anybody."

"Did you recognize the killer, or can you describe him?"

"I'd been blackjacked, I tell you. Look at these lumps on my head. My face was jammed up against the steps and a man was on my back. I couldn't see anything, and I was almost unconscious. Just the same, though, things are beginning to come back to me. I don't believe the shooting was done by the man who was going through my pockets. The shot seemed to come from outside the entry. And I'm practically sure that I heard two men running away."

"Hum-m-m-m-m. This gun, now." Hallam turned the weapon over in his hands. "You claim it belonged to Blaney?"

"I picked it up on the landing where Hance had dropped it. I did that just before Shelton got here. What he says about my flourishing it is a lie," Steve replied.

"Yeah? It's Blaney's gun, is it?" Hallam pursed his lips. "His initials would be 'H B,' I reckon. Well, this gun has 'SM' scratched on the butt."

"And that about clinches it!" Dr. Shelton ejaculated, a queer look of surprise on his face. "I told you, Maguire, that your story wouldn't hold water!"

"Look here, Hallam, I can explain that gun," Steve said quickly. "Hance had a pair of these four-fifty-fives. He gave me one of them and I marked it, but I haven't taken it out of the flat this year. It weighs three pounds, and you can't get shells for it in Karazan—— have to send below for them. When I carry a six-gun at all, it's a thirty-eight S. and W. Officers' Special, and that's down on my boat. Hance must have grabbed the first gun he got his hands on, and it happened to be the one he'd given me."

"Hum-m-m-m." Hallam looked skeptical. "Well, Maguire, I'm not trying you, you know. I'll lock you up for tonight. You'll get a hearing before the commissioner tomorrow."

"I'll be at the commissioner's office any time Judge Devore wants me," Steve said. "There's no need to lock me up, Hallam. Go out and find the men that slugged and robbed me, and you'll find the killer. While you're trying to pin this murder on me, they're getting farther away every minute."

Dr. Shelton had slipped out of the bedroom a few moments before. Now he came back, his manner portentous.

"The caliber of that revolver is rather unusual, isn't it, Hallam?" he asked.

The deputy nodded.

"Mighty unusual," he agreed. "I didn't know there was a gun of that size in Karazan. The British used some of 'em in the War, I believe, but they don't often get up here."

"Well, then," said the doctor, "if it is proved that the bullet which killed Blaney was of that unusual caliber, it will prove rather conclusively that Maguire shot him with the gun you have in your hand. If it isn't that caliber, then the chances are strong that Maguire's story is true."

Hallam scratched his angular jaw.

"Yeah, I guess that's so," he said.

"Here's the bullet," said the doctor. He extended his hand, in which was cuddled a leaden slug. "It occurred to me that since the bullet which killed Blaney passed entirely through his body, it must either be on the floor of the landing, or in the wall back of where he fell, as shown by the bloodstains. I found it imbedded in the plaster."

STEVE gave a long sigh of relief. "For once you showed some sense, Shelton. Try that bullet, Hallam. You'll find it doesn't fit."

Deputy Hallam took the battered slug.

Its point was expanded and misshapen, but the base was apparently undamaged. Slowly, while the others watched, he introduced it in the revolver's muzzle. It stuck on the lands. A larger caliber than forty-five would not have entered it at all, a smaller would have passed in freely.

"A perfect fit," he announced. "That settles it, Maguire. You'll have to come with me." He dropped the bullet into a side pocket of his coat and produced a pair of handcuffs. "Put out your wrists," he ordered.

Steve stared at him stupidly. He had been absolutely sure the bullet would not fit, and the result of the test left him dazed. Hallam mistook his stunned silence for a passive acceptance of the situation. He thrust the revolver in his pocket, seized Steve's left arm and snapped shut the steel cuff.

The touch sent a thrill of horror through Steve's body. Instinctively, the right hand which hung at his side flashed up in a balled fist.

It was a terrible blow. Into it went all the outrage, sorrow and bafflement of the past few hours, backed by steely muscles and a free creature's dread of captivity. It lifted Deputy Hallam from his feet and hurled him to the other side of the room. He landed with a crash and lay still.

Dr. Shelton gave a startled cry and dashed for the door, but Steve caught him in one lithe leap. He spun the stocky little man around, ran his hands over his clothes and extracted from a hip pocket a thirty-two caliber automatic.

Steve was entirely cool now. Naturally aggressive, he was more at ease since he had ceased to take Fate's blows lying down.

That he was in a desperately bad position, he well knew. The evidence against him, circumstantial though most of it might be, was damning. Any jury in Alaska, he thought, would probably find him guilty.

But he was not facing a jury. Not yet.

IV

STEVE shut the bedroom door and locked it. Then he explored Hallam's pockets, found the handcuff key and freed his wrist. He dragged the still unconscious deputy over to the bed, pulled up his limp arms and fettered them around an upright of the steel frame. Hallam's coat yielded a second pair of handcuffs, and with these Steve secured the protesting doctor.

"You damned murderer!" Shelton cried furiously. "I'll enjoy signing your death certificate when you're hanged!"

Steve stood up and looked down at the rage-distorted face.

"I'm not a murderer," he said. "I didn't shoot Blaney. Shelton, why are you so anxious to prove that I did?"

The doctor's answer was a lurid stream of vituperation.

"No, it isn't because you think I'm a thus-and-so," Steve drawled. "You wouldn't hang a man for that, even if it were true. Otherwise, you'd have hung most of your friends and committed suicide a long while ago. I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that you were in the poker game with Bull Gunter and Hance Blaney when Hance was drugged or hypnotized into signing away his property and mine. He told me about that, just before he died. Is that the reason you want to hang me and get me out of the way too, Shelton?"

Steve paused for a reply which he did not expect to receive.

"You had an office patient when I called up," Steve went on. "I wonder if that could have been Gunter, come to be repaired after a little mix-up we had earlier in the evening. I wonder if you two didn't hatch out together the notion of pinning this killing on me. You knew Hance would die in a few minutes, from what I had told you. How about it?"

"If it's of any interest to you," growled the doctor, "I fixed up Gunter two hours ago."

Steve knew that this was probably true, if his stepfather had recovered consciousness at all quickly; and so Steve abandoned that line of inquiry. At best it had been no more than a wild guess.

"I might add," Shelton said viciously, "that if you should clear yourself of this murder, which you will not, Gunter has a charge against you of assault and robbery that will put you away for a long time."

"I might admit the assault," Steve said, "but where does the robbery come in?"

"While he was unconscious you

looted his safe and stole several thousand dollars from his pocket."

"And that, of course," said Steve, "is all poppycock."

He thought it likely that Shelton had invented the story on the spur of the moment, but he dismissed the matter from his mind. There was something, much more important, about which he wished to satisfy himself.

He went to the closet where for many months the pair of four hundred fifty-five revolvers had hung side by side. Yes, there was the other one, that mate to the weapon which bore his initials on its butt. He came back to Shelton, carrying the two guns.

"I don't mind telling you," he said with a puzzled frown, "that this situation has got me up a stump. Here are Hance's two revolvers—the only guns of that caliber in Alaska, so far as I know. It is possible, of course, that the thug who robbed me also had one of these oversize revolvers, but it's a long way from being probable. Coincidences like that are hard to swallow. They just don't happen."

"That's what the jury will say," jeered the doctor.

"They would," Steve agreed. "Anybody would. I would, myself. I'm going to have another look at that bullet."

He bent over the deputy, who had struggled to a sitting posture and was evidently trying to remember what it was all about. Hallam paled visibly at the sight of Steve's two guns, and drew up his knees.

"Hold still," Steve ordered. "If you try to kick me, I'll give you another trip to dreamland." He laid one of the guns on the floor, slipped a hand into Hallam's pocket and extracted the fatal bullet.

"It fits," he said disconsolately, after a moment. "I was almost certain it wouldn't, but it does."

"Of course it does," Shelton snarled. "That's the gun it was fired from."

"But not the gun that shot Hance Blaney, as I positively know," Steve pointed out. "Therefore, this can't be the bullet that killed him." He looked at the doctor speculatively. "Nobody saw you dig this out of the wall."

"The hole is still there. Look for yourself."

"I have no doubt about the hole," Steve said slowly. "I'm just wondering—— I'm wondering if this is the bullet you dug out of it. It doesn't seem to have any marks of plaster on it. In fact, it's remarkably clean, as if it had been washed." He stared hard at the doctor. "Shelton, this isn't the bullet!"

THE doctor laughed loudly.

"Rave on," he jeered. "You're not convincing anybody."

"I've mighty near convinced myself," and Steve, his eyes alight, "and that's a whole lot. If this isn't the right bullet, you either threw away the one you dug out—and you didn't have much chance to do that—or you've got it about you somewhere. I'm going to find out. Will you be quiet, or do I have to slug you?"

The doctor's face congested.

"Don't you dare touch me!" he raged. "Hallam, don't let him fool you. If he claims to find a bullet in my pocket, it'll be one he's planted there."

"Save your breath," Steve cried exultantly. He suddenly grasped the doctor's feet, upended him and shook him violently. There was a rain of pencils, cigar-case, fountain pen and various other miscellany from the physician's pockets. Steve lowered the doctor to the floor, made a swift swoop and came up with the thing he sought.

This bullet appeared to be of about the same size as the other, and was even more distorted, but its base slipped easily into the muzzle of the four hundred and fifty-five revolver. Steve demonstrated this to the deputy, who was now showing considerably more interest in what was going on.

Hallam nodded painfully.

"It's a forty-five," he mumbled. "Damn you, Maguire, I think you cracked my jaw-bone."

"The only thing I'm interested in is your eye-sight," Steve said heartlessly. He held no grudge against Hallam, but neither did he feel any regrets for the blow. "You saw me shake this bullet from Shelton's pocket. You see the marks of plaster that are still on it. I'm telling you that this is the bullet Shelton dug out of the wall—the bullet that killed Hance Blaney!"

"Yeah, you're tellin' me," grunted Hallam. "An' I'm tellin' *you* to unlock these cuffs, pronto! You've made the case bad enough for yourself already."

"If I turn you loose, will you lock

up Shelton for the night, as—what do you call it?—accessory after the fact to this murder, and then go with me to arrest Bull Gunter for the killing?"

"I will not!" Hallam roared, his pale eyes glittering. "I'll lock you up for resistin' an officer, if for nothin' else; an' there's plenty more. What's Bull Gunter got to do with it, or Doc Shelton either?"

"I'll tell you," cried Steve, afire with the theory which had sprung full-fledged in his mind, and of whose essential truth he was growing more confident every minute. "Bull Gunter and Shelton are thick as thieves usually get to be. They were together in the crooked game that wrecked my firm. Tonight I knocked Gunter out. He claims I robbed him, which is a lie, but no matter. He wanted to get even. After Shelton had fixed up his head, where a telephone had landed on it in the rumpus with me, he got one of his gang and waited for me in the entry-way below. He knew that I sold my fish tonight and thought I'd have a big roll, which may have had something to do with it.

"When I got here, they slugged me. It wasn't Gunter who did that, I know. It was a man as tall as I am and not much heavier. But Gunter would have been waiting just outside. Hance heard the racket, turned on the light and came out on the landing with this gun in his hand. Maybe Gunter thought Hance recognized him, maybe he believed he'd be safer all round if Hance was dead, maybe he even had it all figured out that the shooting would be blamed on me. Anyhow, he shot him—with a forty-five caliber gun!

"Hance fired back, blind, dying, but he was one old-timer who could shoot. He didn't kill his murderer, but he hit him; and his bullet—the four hundred and fifty-five bullet—didn't go through Bull Gunter's big body. It stayed in until Gunter, possibly with the help of his gang-mate, could get to Shelton's office.

SHELTON dug out the bullet, dressed the wound, and about that time I called up. Shelton wouldn't promise to come until I gave him the details of the shooting. Then he was able to put two and two together, if he didn't already know all about it. If Gunter hadn't confided in him before, he had to then. They fixed up a scheme. Hance was dead or dying, but I was left, and might be dangerous to the men who had robbed Hance and me. Here was a chance to finish me off as surely as if they shot me, and at the same time stop further inquiry into Blaney's murder.

"Shelton came up here with the bullet that was fired from Hance's gun—the bullet he had taken out of Gunter—and when he got a chance, he brought it forth as proof that I'd done the killing—— But first, Hallam, he telephoned you and planted the idea that I was guilty. He thought you'd be stupid enough to swallow the story whole, and he was right. He almost got away with the scheme. If I hadn't hit you on the jaw just when I did, he'd have got rid of the forty-five caliber bullet—the one that did the killing—and I'd have been in a devil of a fix."

Steve paused and Hallam spoke up, his angular face dark with wrath.

"You're in a devil of a fix right now, Maguire. I don't believe a word of your fool story. No innocent man would have resisted arrest. Unlock these cuffs or it will be the worse for you. I'm warnin' you!"

"Will you lock up Shelton and go with me to find out if Gunter is wounded?"

"I'll make no terms with you," Hallam roared. "You're under arrest right now!"

"Only it didn't seem to take," Steve laughed. "All right, you stay here, then; both of you. I'll have to do the job myself, and if I can't have your help I don't want your interference. People will be passing here on the way to the dock by seven o'clock in the morning, perhaps earlier. If you yell loud enough, somebody may hear you."

He had taken Hallam's automatic from its holster under the officer's armpit. This, with Shelton's weapon and the key to the handcuffs, he laid on the window ledge. The unused four hundred and fifty-five Colt he shoved into a holster which he attached to his belt.

He bent over Hance Blaney's body for a moment, breathing a silent farewell. Then he unlocked the door and quietly went out into the foggy night.

V

STEVE glanced at the luminous dial of his watch and was surprised to find that it was only a few minutes after one o'clock in the

morning, little more than three hours since his return to Karazan. During that brief time the whole structure of his life had been wrecked, every plan laid waste.

Queerly enough, Steve was not depressed, though his sorrow for Hance Blaney was a dull ache which leisure would bring to the fore. As he hurried along the familiar streets, his speed little retarded by the fog, his spirits rose to the challenge of the situation.

If all else failed, he told himself, he still had youth, health, strength and a good boat. He knew the maze of Alaska's reef-strewn waterways as well as any man in the Territory. With a few hours' start and the fog to cloak his course, he could have the *Wanderer* safely hidden before pursuit began. Then he would plan his next move.

The malign fate which had attended Steve that night had been tempered by one bit of good fortune. Before starting for the flat he had locked in the *Wanderer's* small safe the money which Pat Maloney had paid him for his fish. The bandit who had attacked him in the entry had taken his bill-fold, but it contained less than three hundred dollars. In the safe in the pilot house was nearly five thousand. He would not be hampered in his movements by lack of money.

But Steve was by no means content merely to escape and spend the rest of his life as a fugitive. Somewhere in Karazan was the man who had shot Hance Blaney. That Dr. Shelton had connived with the killer, Steve was sure. If his theory were correct, the guilty man would bear a wound such as a four hundred and fifty-five caliber bullet might make.

Steve was determined that before the night was over he would know whether Bull Gunter bore such a wound. He would raid the gang-leader's living quarters over the speak-easy and gambling joint known as "Gunter's Trollers' Rest," and get his case clear. Then he would release Hallam. He believed that the angular deputy, stupid and stubborn though he was, would tell the truth about the bullets.

To carry out his plan, Steve wanted the help of a man who would follow him blindly, without argument or question. And the only man whom he could surely trust to do this was his old deckhand, Scarface Pete, who would now be sleeping aboard the *Wanderer*.

Steve wondered whether, in Pete's dreams, his truant memory had returned and was making clear to him the secrets of his buried past. As always, he felt a wave of sympathy and affection for the afflicted man.

He quickened his pace and soon reached the public dock where he had left his boat. He plunged down the incline to the float, expecting every moment to be hailed by the peg-legged watchman, Dave Toomy; but he was not challenged. Dave was probably napping on his sheltered bench under the incline, Steve thought.

The protection which Toomy's presence gave to boat owners was more or less of a joke, Steve reflected with a grin, as he sped along the float. Then he stumbled and went sprawling.

He was back on his feet in an instant. With the toe of his shoe he investigated the obstruction that had caused his downfall; then, with a startled ejaculation, he knelt and lighted a match.

Old Toomy lay there with closed eyes. His hands were lashed together, his neckerchief had been thrust in his mouth as a gag, and the brief flame showed a dark bruise on his bald head.

"Blackjacked!" Steve muttered. "That was a nasty one, old-timer."

HE PLUCKED out the gag and cut the bonds. Then he thrust his hand inside Toomy's flannel shirt and felt for his heart. It was pumping strongly. The rugged old sourdough seemed to be no more than stunned. The night was mild. He was as well off there as anywhere.

"Just the same, I surely hate to leave you this way," Steve said under his breath. "I hope you saw who hit you. Otherwise, it might be charged up against me, and there's plenty without that. In some ways, I'd rather be charged with another murder."

He knew that the brutal slugging of the old watchman would arouse considerably more public indignation than would a clean killing for cause. Dave Toomy had a host of friends among the fishermen and the townspeople as well. He was something of a protegé of Judge Devore, U. S. Commissioner at Karazan.

It was not hard to guess the reason

for the assault. Somebody must have attempted to go aboard one of the boats at the float without satisfying Toomy of his right to do so. Old Dave would have resisted such an attempt with all the force of his aged arms. Then the blackjack. Steve rubbed his own bruised head in sympathy.

But why the gag and the bonds? They seemed to indicate that the watchman's assailant wanted a considerable time in which to accomplish whatever purpose he had in mind.

With a sudden startled feeling that all might not be well aboard the *Wanderer,* Steve moved on. He was relieved when her bulk loomed up through the thinning fog at the outer end of the float where he had left her. He laid a hand on her rail and was about to vault to the deck, when he heard a tinkle of metal somewhere on board.

He paused, frozen into immobility. Again he heard the metallic clink and the sound of a man's breath suddenly expelled, as though from some violent effort.

What tinkering job, Steve questioned silently, would Pete be doing at this hour? Instinct told him that the deckhand had not made those sounds. They came from the pilot-house, not the engine-room.

Quietly Steve swung up on deck, wondering if the slight motion it gave to the boat would startle the secret worker. Apparently not. Again came the tinkle and clink of steel on steel. With the revolver in his hand, he stole cautiously to the door of the pilot-house. It was slightly ajar, and from within came a faint glow of light.

Steve peered through the narrow opening. An electric torch lay on the floor, pointed toward the *Wanderer's* little safe. It revealed a man who was straining against some implement that seemed to be attached to the safe's knob.

With one swift movement Steve shouldered open the door and thrust the muzzle of the four hundred and fifty-five against the man's bowed spine.

"Don't move!" he ordered. "Just as you are!"

There was an explosive grunt, and the man instinctively cringed away from the menacing pressure. The movement threw him off balance. The bar to which he clung slipped from its grip on the safe. Steve caught a glimpse of a startled simian face, then a flying foot struck the flashlight and wrecked it as the man crashed to the floor. At the same instant the steel bar came swishing through the air and knocked the revolver from Steve's hand.

He dived for it, found it, and as his fingers closed over the butt the other's hand grasped the muzzle. Steve wrenched it free and heard a cry of pain as the front sight tore across the yegg's palm. Then he struck downward viciously, felt the heavy barrel impact on something solid, struck again. He leaped back and snapped on the light switch beside the door.

The would-be safe robber lay on his back, his arms spread wide. Blood was running from his scored palm, and from wounds in his scalp where the barrel of the four hundred and fifty-five had struck. He was an unprepossessing rascal, whose jutting eyebrows, flat nose and protruding teeth made him resemble a great ape.

He was dressed in clothes of good quality but flashy pattern. His powerful hands showed no marks of toil. Probably a strong-arm man from one of the many dives that preyed on the fishermen ashore, Steve thought.

He whipped a coil of light rope out of a locker, whirled the man over and bound him hand and foot with a succession of seamanlike knots. Whatever else he might be, this was undoubtedly the thug who had blackjacked Toomy. It would be poetic justice to leave him on the float with an end of the rope in the old watchman's hand. Also, it would get rid of a prisoner with whom Steve did not want to trouble himself just then.

With a heave, he hoisted the bound body to his shoulder. As he did so, two objects fell from the inverted pockets with a soft double thud. He glanced down.

One was a blackjack: an implement of woven leather which doubtless encased a flat piece of lead at the larger end. At the other object Steve stared with wondering eyes. It was a bill-fold, on which shone in bright gilt letters his own name.

UNCEREMONIOUSLY Steve dumped the yegg on the floor and picked up the bill-fold which had been stolen from his pocket as he

lay half stunned in the entry-way to the flat in Chickamin Street, so short a time before.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he ejaculated, eyeing the now feebly groaning crook. "You certainly are a persistent cuss. I don't believe I'll turn you over to Toomy just yet. You ought to have an interesting story to tell when you wake up."

He was jubilant at this sudden turn of fortune. Beyond any reasonable question, the man who lay at his feet was the thug who had blackjacked him in Chickamin Street. Either he or his companion—almost certainly Bull Gunter—had fired the shot that killed Hance Blaney.

For a moment it seemed to Steve that by the capture of this bandit his own innocence of the murder had been automatically established. The man must have helped Gunter home from the doctor's office, then proceeded to the *Wanderer* in search of the money which he had failed to find on Steve's person.

Those were the facts, he was sure; but brief reflection showed him that they were not so easily proved. The yegg would undoubtedly deny that he had ever been in Chickamin Street. With a cynical grin Steve realized how far his own statement would go in the face of the testimony of Shelton and Hallam, if the deputy chose to be vindictive.

No, he must go through with his original plan. He must establish the fact of Bull Gunter's wound and be ready to present a complete case before the doctor and deputy were free to interfere with his movements.

And he knew that the two men could easily drag the bed to which they were shackled within reach of the handcuff key on the window ledge. He had purposely left it so, in order to save them from over-long confinement in case some mischance prevented his return. He had turned out the light in the flat, believing that they would not see the key before daylight. But if one of them had noticed where he placed it, they might escape at any time. It behooved him to get busy.

But where was Scarface Pete? Events had moved so rapidly since Steve stepped aboard the *Wanderer* that he had hardly thought of his deckhand. Was it possible, he wondered, that Pete in his bunk in the engine-room could have slept through all this commotion? Usually the slightest strange noise aboard the boat he loved would have brought Pete up to investigate.

Steve darted out of the pilothouse and down the iron stair to the engine-room. He snapped on the light. The blankets on the bunk were tumbled, Pete's boots stood on the floor beside a chair on which his clothes were piled; but Pete was not there!

Puzzled and worried, Steve went back on deck and stood considering the problem. Then he heard a muffled thumping. It seemed to come from his own stateroom aft of the pilot-house. In a flash he was at the door and flung it open.

"Pete!" he called.

A queer whining noise answered him from the floor.

With trembling fingers Steve fumbled for the light switch, found it.

At his feet on the floor of the stateroom lay a small man, securely bound, his mouth distended by a large gag made from a soiled towel. Pale eyes stared up at Steve from under a mop of tow-colored hair. In utter surprise he recognized the man called Whitey, whom he had rescued from Bull Gunter's throttling hands several hours before.

Steve knelt and removed the gag. Whitey spat vigorously, swallowed hard, ran his tongue over his bruised lips, grinned at Steve.

"T'anks, Boss," he said. "Whyn't ya take off de ropes, too?"

Steve shook his head.

"Maybe you ought to be tied. What are you doing on my boat?"

"Why, Boss," Whitey whined ingratiatingly, "I come aboard to see ya. I had business wit' ya. But some big bozo bats me on de nut wit' a sap de minute I hits de deck. I pass out, see? I wakes up in de dark wit' dese ropes on me, an' wit' me mout' stopped. Den I begins kickin' on de floor. Den you comes. Dat's all I know."

"Yeah, you had business with me," Steve drawled skeptically. "Probably the same business as the yegg I've got tied up in the pilot-house—you wanted to see what was inside my safe. You can stay the way you are for the present. I've got to hunt for my deck-hand."

"Please, Boss, prop me up ag'in' de bunk," whined Whitey. "I can't lay on my back, an' dis floor is hard on de face."

Steve took him by the shoulders and lifted him to a sitting position. As he

did so, he saw the hilt of a knife protruding above the collar of Whitey's disordered coat. He drew it from its sheath, slung under the coat at the back of the little man's neck, and instantly recognized the ivory handle with the carved death's head at the end. It was the same dagger that he had left on the table in the saltery office, atop the thousand dollars he had paid for the firm's dishonored check.

"SO YOU went back," he accused Whitey. "You went back while Gunter was still in dreamland, cleaned out the safe, took his money and everything else that wasn't nailed down. No wonder he thought I had robbed him!"

That was the reason back of the attack in the entry, Steve thought, or one of the reasons.

"I'll bet you never left the building," he went on. "You slammed the door to make Gunter think you were gone. Probably you were listening to everything that Gunter and I said."

Whitey grinned.

"I heard plenty, Boss. Say, what would it be wort' to ya if I told ya how to get back all de money for dem checks —yes, an' de buildin's, too?"

Steve stared hard at the little man.

"Do you know something, or are you just exercising your voice?"

"I kin deliver de goods, Boss," Whitey said earnestly. "Dat's de business I come aboard to talk to ya about. Would ya pay me two grand, say nuttin' about my part in de game, an' help me to a safe get-away to de States? Would ya?"

He knew something, for sure. Certainty of that was written in every line of his pallid little face. And it was also plainly written that he was bursting with eagerness to tell what he knew.

"If I get back my property through information that you give me," Steve said, "I'll send two thousand dollars to any address you name. And I'll protect you as far as I can. You'll have to manage your own get-away."

"Dat's all right wit' me, Boss," Whitey said quickly. "You're a right guy. You'll do what ya say. I seen ya pay for dat check when Bull was layin' cuckoo, I had to laugh, Boss. Dat check was queer. Yer partner, he never signed it."

"You're sure about that? You can prove it?"

"I ought to be sure," said Whitey, with a certain air of pride. "I wrote dat check meself. Yes, an' de udder ones; an' I signed de deeds to de buildin's. Take off dese ropes an' gimme a pen. I'll say it wit' samples!"

Bits of the night's puzzle clicked into place. Steve breathed a silent prayer that Hance Blaney could know how quickly he had been vindicated in his partner's eyes. But Steve knew that in his heart he had never really doubted Hance.

"No, never mind giving me samples of your penmanship," he said, when with Whitey's own dagger he had cut the little forger's bonds. "I believe you. It had to be something like that. Tell me just what happened, and be quick."

The tale was soon told. Newly arrived in Karazan's underworld, whither his reputation for skill in his line had preceded him, Whitey had been engaged by Gunter to append to certain checks and documents signatures of which examples were furnished him. He had done this, receiving one hundred dollars as a retaining fee, with the promise of a much larger sum if the enterprise proved successful.

The promise had not been kept. Whitey knew, as did all the underworld, that Blaney had been kept under an opiate in one of the private rooms at the "Trollers' Rest," while the forged checks had been put through the bank. Not knowing the exact balance, they had simply put through one after another until the bank refused to honor them. They had got more than twenty thousand dollars, Whitey was sure, and he had demanded a share of the loot. Gunter had rejected his claims with scorn and contumely. Steve had witnessed the result of Whitey's attempt at forcible collection.

After Steve had gone, Whitey had returned to the office and from the contents of Gunter's pockets paid himself according to his own idea of the value of his services. In the safe he had found an envelope from the bank containing cancelled checks of Maguire & Blaney for the previous month, just closed. He had taken those which bore his own handiwork, with the notion that he might harm Gunter and do himself a good turn by selling them and his secret to Steve.

Steve's lean face was set in grim lines when the little crook had finished.

"Come with me," he ordered. He led

the tow-haired man to the pilot-house. The yegg was sitting up, his back against the safe. Steve suspected that he had been trying to cut his bonds by chafing them against a sharp corner.

"This is the man who knocked you out, Whitey," said Steve. "Look him over."

Whitey eyed the big yegg apprehensively.

"Say, Boss, I wanta fade out o' dis," he whined.

Steve took him outside and shut the pilot-house door.

"DO YOU know his name?" he asked in a low tone.

"Dey call him Ape Dietz."

"He's one of Gunter's gang, of course."

"He hangs out at de 'Trollers' Rest.' Dat's all I know. Boss, I gotta go."

Steve released his hold and the little man slipped over the rail and disappeared in the fog. The sound of his feet could be heard on the float. Steve re-entered the pilot-house.

"What have you done with my deckhand?" he demanded. "Speak up, Dietz, or I'll kick your monkey face in!"

The man glowered at him silently. Steve drew back a foot, as if to make good his threat.

"Hey, don't!" gasped the yeg. "A guy jumped out at me—a guy in his underclothes. Maybe he's the one you're lookin' for. You'll find him tied to th' port rail."

Steve rushed out of the room and in a few minutes came back, guiding and half supporting Scarface Pete. Pete appeared to be dazed, and there was a queer look in his eyes. Steve steered him to a locker seat and he slumped on it, dropping his head in his hands. He had evidently been hit hard. He seemed in no condition to be of much help to Steve.

But Steve was beginning to believe that he needed no help. He could work this thing out alone. If the jig-saw puzzle in which the night had entangled him was not yet solved, at least he had most of the pieces. If his luck held, he thought he would soon have them arranged in orderly array.

He had in his pocket the forged checks which had passed through the bank. The recovery of the stolen money was certain. Nothing could bring Hance back to life, but his murderer could be punished. If the yegg could be startled into making a statement that would definitely implicate Gunter, the rest ought to be easy.

"Dietz," he said suddenly, "Bull Gunter claims that he wasn't the one who shot Blaney. He says you did it."

Dietz grunted inarticulately, and spat.

"Hance Blaney shot!" exclaimed Scarface Pete. He raised his head and stared strangely at Steve. "I know Hance Blaney. I know you, too. You're Sam Maguire."

"You keep out of this, Pete," Steve said impatiently. "You had a bad rap on the head and you're still woozy from it. Better turn in for a while. I'll need you later."

Pete stood up and gazed about him uncertainly.

"This is the *Wanderer*," he said, as announcing a discovery.

"Of course it is. Don't you know where your bunk is? Here, I'll go with you."

Pete was muttering to himself as he followed Steve down to the engine-room. When they came into the lighted room he seized Steve's arm and peered into his face. He was trembling with excitement.

"I'm gettin' things straight," he cried. "You're *Steve* Maguire, not my old partner Sam. No, he's dead. You're his boy, that was just a baby when— Why, I been workin' for you more'n two years. I remember that, now. It's all comin' back."

Old Pete was growing excited.

"Stevie, I was your father's partner. I held you on my knee when you was a yearlin'. I got a name, now, an' a good one. Stevie, I'm Jack McCane!"

"Your mind's wandering, old-timer," Steve said in a soothing voice. "Jack McCane was killed with my father when the mine tunnel collapsed more than twenty years ago. Go to sleep now, Pete. You'll be all right when you wake up."

"I've slept too long, boy," said the scar-faced man. "Run along an' don't bother about me. I got a lot o' rememberin' to do." He began putting on his clothes. "What's this about Hance Blaney bein' shot?"

"It's a long story. I haven't time to tell you about it now."

Steve left him and went back to the pilot-house. At another time, even the faint possibility that his old deckhand

had regained his memory of the lost years, that he even imagined himself to be the Jack McCane who had been the partner of Steve's father, would have been a matter of the most intense interest. Now Steve gave it hardly a thought. He wanted, above all things, to have a few uninterrupted minutes with Ape Dietz.

"I'll put him through my own third degree," he thought grimly. "If I can't make him talk, knowing what I know, it's a cinch the marshal's office never would be able to."

But as he laid his hand on the pilot-house door, he heard a sound of footsteps clattering down the incline from the street level to the float; and dimly through the fog he saw the beam of a powerful electric flashlight. He stepped back in the shadow. Were these also Bull Gunter's men?

VI

THERE were other boats moored along the float, nearer the shore end. At each of these the footsteps stopped, the light played searchingly for a moment, then moved on. There was little doubt in Steve's mind that the *Wanderer* was the objective.

Angrily he drew the four hundred and fifty-five, and the dazzling beam of the flashlight caught him so, jaw set hard, gun ready.

"Easy with the gun, Maguire!" came a voice that was vibrant with authority, yet held a friendly note. The hand that carried the torch turned it backward. In its light Steve saw the keen face and athletic figure of U. S. Commissioner Devore, beside him the big form of Saul Jacobs, Karazan's chief deputy marshal.

Steve lowered the revolver as the beam again swung toward him. He would not resist arrest at these hands.

"Come aboard," he invited.

"I think not, thanks," said the commissioner. "Maguire, have you seen or heard any disturbance on the float within the past hour or so?"

Steve's heart leaped. The words and their tone told him plainly that Judge Devore and this deputy knew nothing of the sinister events in Chickamin Street. He could tell his story without having to fight a preconceived belief in his guilt.

"No, not on the float," he said. "What are you getting at, Judge?"

"About half an hour ago," said the commissioner, "Dave Toomy woke me up at my house with a tale of being hit on the head and knocked out by a man he tried to stop and question. To satisfy the old fellow, I got Jacobs out of bed and came down here to investigate, on the chance that somebody on one of the boats might know something about it. You looked ready for battle when we came up. What's the idea?"

"Yeah, why the artillery, Maguire?" asked the hitherto silent deputy.

Steve laughed in sheer relief. He tossed the revolver on the deck and vaulted over the rail, landing on the float before the officers.

"I caught a man trying to crack my safe," he said in a low tone. "I've got him tied up in my pilot-house. Chances are, he's the one who slugged Toomy, for he had a blackjack. When I saw you men coming along the float, I didn't know but what you were members of his gang."

Exclamations of surprise burst from both Devore and Jacobs. As one man they started for the boat.

"Wait a minute," Steve said earnestly. "I've got a lot to tell you that I don't want that yegg to hear."

"Wait, hell!" grinned Jacobs, drawing his gun. "I'll put the cuffs on that bird. Then you can talk."

"What's your objection to that, Maguire?" asked the commissioner, eyeing him keenly.

"He's safely tied up. He'll not get away. Murder's been done tonight, and this yegg was a party to it. If he's handled in just the right way, he may save the Territory a lot of money and an innocent man a lot of trouble."

"Hold on, Jacobs," said Judge Devore. "All right, Maguire, come ahead with your story."

As briefly and convincingly as he could, Steve told of the events of the night, suppressing only the part which dealt with Whitey. He had promised to protect the little crook, so far as possible, and he saw no need of mentioning him now.

When he had finished, the commissioner and the deputy exchanged glances. Jacobs had chuckled over the tale of Hallam's downfall, but now both were grave.

"Well, what do you want us to do, Maguire?" Judge Devore asked.

"Carry on what I started. Make this

man believe that Gunter is blaming the killing on him. Scare a counter charge out of him."

The commissioner looked doubtful, and Steve remembered that Gunter was quite a power in local politics. No more honest official lived than Judge Devore; but experience had taught him caution, when dealing with the big gang-leader.

"If this yegg isn't made to talk before a smart lawyer gets hold of him," Steve urged, "he'll deny that he ever was in Chickamin Street. I can't prove that I ever lost my bill-fold, for it's in my pocket now. Unless this man admits it, I can't prove that there was any assault and shooting at the stairway of the flat. I've got Shelton's testimony to fight against, Judge, with Hallam to back him. It's even chances that Hallam will lie about my finding that other bullet; and of course Shelton will."

"Hallam's honest," said Devore. "We'll tell the truth about what happened in the flat after he got there."

"I'll bet he don't know what happened," grunted Jacobs. "Tom Hallam's a damn' fool. Well, Judge, shall we go? I'd like to get a squint at that bird."

JUST a moment, Jacobs. This is all very irregular, Maguire, but I want to help you if I can. On the other hand, I dislike to make an open accusation of this kind against Gunter without something more definite on which to base it. You tell a convincing story; but, after all, there's nothing but your guesswork to connect him with the murder in any way."

"If this yegg accuses him, and you find he has a fresh bullet wound, it will pretty well check my guesswork, won't it?"

"I'd say that such a wound would at least give him something to explain—yes, and Dr. Shelton, too. But if this man is at all clever he'll refuse to talk."

"Hell, I'll make him talk," grunted Jacobs. "I think Maguire's got the thing straight. Come on, Judge. Let's go. After this bird has spilled his story and I've got him put away, I'll pull in Gunter and make him account for every dimple on his big carcass. I've been prayin' for a chance to hang somethin' heavy on that baby for many a year. He's been immune too long."

"You'll find him in bed with a fresh hole in him, all nicely bandaged up," Steve asserted confidently.

As he spoke, he heard again the tramp of feet coming down the incline. A flashlight gleamed. Through the fog sounded a great bellowing laugh which ended in a queer squealing note.

"By the Lord Harry!" Jacobs ejaculated. "I'd recognize that laugh if I heard it in China. Here's Bull Gunter now!"

And Bull Gunter it was. He stalked out of the fog at the side of a tall, angular man who gave a triumphant shout as his angry eyes picked Steve out of the little group.

"I've got you now, you damned murderer!" he roared, yanking a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. "Let's see whether you get away from me again!"

Deputy Jacobs stepped between them decisively.

"You lost your chance, Hallam," he said with a grin. "This man is in my charge now. I'll cuff him, if he needs it. You let him alone. Hello, Bull. You look pretty healthy for a man who's had a bullet dug out of him tonight."

"So you fell for that yarn, too!" Hallam snorted. "Yes, you're a slick talker," he jeered at Steve. "I more'n half believed your lies. When Doc Shelton an' me got ourselves loose, I was fool enough to hunt up Gunter before I looked for you. An' what did I find? I found him playin' poker in the Trollers' Rest, with half a dozen men to testify that he'd been there since around eleven o'clock. Who's loony now, Jacobs?"

Jacobs shot a swift glance at Judge Devore, who shook his head. Steve could feel the change in their attitude toward him.

Gunter's big laugh bellowed forth again.

"I don't know a thing about the murder, Judge," he said to the commissioner, "except that Maguire threatened earlier in the evenin' that he'd kill Hance an' me both, because Blaney had sold me his buildings an' lost a bit in a poker game. But I got to make a charge against him of assault an' robbery. I'm ashamed to say that the kid knocked me out an' robbed me of more'n three grand tonight. Looks like I'm gettin' too old an' feeble to protect myself."

Steve stared at him, his mind in a whirl. He cared nothing for the charge of robbery. That could be cleared up easily enough when the time came. But

Gunter's manner was that of a man in vigorous health. It seemed inconceivable that such a wound as the four hundred and fifty-five would make could leave him apparently unaffected. And if he bore no wound, the whole structure which Steve had built would topple to the ground.

Jacobs turned to Hallam.

"Take charge of Maguire, Tom. Don't put the cuffs on him, but don't let him get away from you again, either. I'll go aboard the *Wanderer* and haul out another bird that's ready for the cage."

Steve turned desperately to the commissioner.

"Aren't you going to question that man, Judge?"

The warm friendliness was gone from Judge Devore's manner.

"Certainly he'll be questioned, at the proper place and time," he said. "You'll get all your rights, Maguire, never fear; both before me and before the Grand Jury, if there seems to be reason to hold you for trial."

"Who's that up there by the pilot-house?" cried Jacobs. "Hey, you! Let that door alone. Come down here!"

Steve turned. Scarface Pete had come up from the engine room and was standing by the pilot-house. Now he clambered over the rail to the float, in obedience to the deputy's order.

"Oh, so it's you, Pete," said Jacobs, as the light fell on the scarred face.

"You been callin' me Pete," said the old deckhand, "but I want you to know that it ain't my name. I'm Jack McCane, that was pardner to Sam Maguire, this boy's father. Yeah, I'm the man that was buried under a thousand ton o' rock, with Stevie's dad. Don't call me Pete no more. Call me Jack."

Judge Devore looked inquiringly at Steve.

"He's another man who was blackjacked tonight," Steve said. "He's not got over it yet."

"An' I sure hope I never do," said the deckhand. "It brought me my memory back. I been settin' down there on my bunk, rememberin' things I'd forgot for more'n twenty years. Say, Stevie, that man you had tied up seems to be loose. I heard him movin' around in the pilot-house. I was just goin' in to have a look-see when Jacobs yelled at me."

Jacobs swore savagely.

"I wanted to cuff him in the first place," he growled, drawing his gun.

HE SWUNG up on the *Wanderer's* deck. As he did so, the door of the pilot-house was flung open and a dark figure hurtled over the rail and into the midst of the group on the float, knocking Hallam sprawling headlong.

Jacobs' gun roared while Dietz was in mid-air, but apparently without effect, for the fugitive leaped over the prostrate Hallam and sped toward shore. The commissioner's flashlight picked him up and Jacobs fired again.

Dietz staggered and sank to one knee, then rose feebly and took a wavering step. From the float behind Steve came another shot. Dietz spun about and fell in a crumpled heap.

Steve turned. Gunter was thrusting a smoking revolver into a holster that swung from his waist, his cold eyes darting from face to face in the group about him. They rested for a long moment on Steve, and he grinned enigmatically.

With a furious oath, Deputy Jacobs leaped to the float and strode up to Gunter.

"I ought to take your gun away from you," he said angrily. "I had stopped that man. Where did you get any license to shoot him?"

Gunter smiled at him coldly.

"Don't get excited," he advised. "I saw this man run and I saw you, an officer, shoot at him twice. Perhaps you stopped him, but I made sure of him. Why, damn it, man, it was my duty as a citizen. Don't you agree with me, Devore?"

"Oh, I suppose you thought you were justified," said the commissioner. "Nevertheless, I'm sorry you shot him."

"He's deader'n a mackerel," announced Hallam, who was kneeling beside the body of Dietz.

Judge Devore cast a commiserating glance at Steve.

"If your story is true, Maguire, this is a hard blow to you," he said.

Steve nodded wearily. It had indeed been a blow. That bullet from the fog had crumbled to nothingness the brave structure which he had reared. Before him there lay, inevitably, confinement and a harrowing trial, with perhaps the gallows at the end.

A brisk breeze had sprung up, and the fog was disappearing before it. Devore and Gunter snapped out their flashlights. Already the full length of the float was clearly visible in the light of the early Alaskan June dawn.

"Get the ambulance, Hallam," said the commissioner. "Maguire, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we'll have to hold you."

"I suppose so," Steve said. His tired eyes studied Bull Gunter's heavy face. In the growing light his complexion seemed pale and unwholesome, but that might be due to lack of sleep. Still, now that Dietz was dead, the chance that Gunter's magnificent vitality had enabled him to act the part of an unwounded man—that somewhere in his big body was a bandaged bullet-hole—was Steve's only hope of proving his own innocence of Blaney's murder.

"Jacobs," he said, "I wish you'd take Gunter along, too, and give him a physical examination."

The deputy shrugged his shoulders, shook his head.

"No use, Maguire," he growled. "Your theory sounded good to me, but it's all wet. Bull looks too hearty."

Gunter bellowed with laughter. Steve took a step toward him, but Jacobs' big hand clamped down on his arm.

"Easy, Maguire," the deputy warned him. "Don't make me put the cuffs on you."

Steve knew that in a struggle with the giant deputy he had no chance. He saw that Scarface Pete was standing a few yards nearer shore, apparently oblivious of his employer's troubles, his faded blue eyes fixed on Gunter.

"Well, gents," Gunter grinned, "I left a good game to come down here. It's prob'ly broke up by now. But if you don't need me I'll ramble back to the Trollers' Rest and find out."

He turned to go, but the old deckhand stood in his way, his disfigured features working strangely.

"I'm Jack McCane," he cried. "Don't you know me, Bull Gunter? Don't you know your old pardner, that you left for dead in the tunnel of the Princess mine?"

"Oh, sleep it off!" growled Gunter, and tried to pass.

Pete danced nimbly before him and thrust out a long arm. His open palm struck Gunter's left shoulder. It was not a blow, no more than a light push; but the big gambler staggered back with a low cry of pain.

A little prickling chill ran up and down Steve's spine. He whispered to Jacobs. The deputy nodded. He also had noted that seemingly causeless outcry. He was watching Gunter with sudden eager alertness.

"What's the matter with that shoulder?" he demanded.

"Rheumatism," snarled Gunter, his face ghastly. "Keep that damned old half-wit away from me. He ought to be in the Morningside asylum."

"I'm no half-wit," shouted the deckhand. "I'll prove to you that I'm Jack McCane, just like I say."

HE TORE open his flannel shirt and thrust his bared chest almost in Gunter's face.

"See that tattoo-mark, the three joined hands? You've got one just like it, right above your heart. And so had Sam Maguire. A Jap in 'Frisco did the job for all of us, the week before we went North together to find our fortunes. Now, you've *got* to believe me, an' so does everybody else!"

"The old coot's raving," Gunter snarled. "Get out of my way, you lunatic!"

"You killed Sam Maguire, shot him in the back, an' you thought you'd killed me," yelled the scarfaced man. "You blasted a thousand ton o' rock down on us, so nobody would ever know. But I got out, two days after, with my face ruined an' my memory gone, an' not even a name. For more'n twenty years I've lived the life of a stray dog.

"Tonight things come back to me. I remember the gold we'd cleaned up—close to seventy thousand dollars, it was—an' where we cached it, under the shake floor of the cabin that you an' I shared. You stole it, you wolf! An' then you stole Sam Maguire's wife an' abused the boy—— Open up your shirt, Bull Gunter. If the tattoo-marks ain't there on your breast, I'll admit I'm ravin' an' ought to be in the aslyum."

"Yes, open it up, Bull," said Jacobs, moving toward him. "Pete's story sounds mighty circumstantial for a crazy man's dream. Let's see if you got tattoo-marks."

"Not by a damned sight," roared Gunter, backing away. "You got no right to touch me. The man's insane."

"Prove it, then," the deckhand cried, and made a grab at Gunter's collar.

Gunter's gun leaped from its holster. His mask of suavity was gone. He looked like the wolf Pete had called him.

"Stay away from me, damn you!" he rasped. "Hands off that gun, Jacobs! I'm goin' home. If you want me later, you'll know where to find me. But I'll not be publicly humiliated on the say-so of this old lunatic."

"He's not goin' home," yelled the deckhand. "He'll git away in his thirty-knot *Silver Arrow,* an' you'll never ketch him. Hell! I'll stop him!"

Gunter had circled around Scarface Pete and was backing away toward the shore end of the float, his gun muzzle shifting from man to man of the group. There was no pretense now. Grim, desperate, he was ready to shoot his way to liberty.

Old Pete charged straight at the muzzle of the gun.

Gunter's bullet met him as he sprang, and Pete pitched forward on the float. The revolver roared again, and Deputy Jacobs cursed viciously as his gun dropped from the nerveless fingers of a broken arm. A bullet tore through Steve's sleeve as he snatched up the fallen weapon. Another scored his side as he advanced along the float, gun flaming.

He heard a vicious curse from Gunter and knew that one of his bullets had registered, though evidently the wound was slight. Standing squarely on widely planted feet, Gunter sent two ineffective shots at Steve, then the hammer of his gun clicked on an empty cartridge. Instantly he leaped behind a steel oil-drum which stood near the incline, snatching cartridges from his belt as he sprang.

Steve's own gun was almost empty. He had fired three times, Jacobs twice. There should be one bullet left, he thought, and that was enough. He ran forward, eager to come to grips with the murderer of his father and his partner before the killer could reload.

Gunter rose fom behind the oil-drum, snapping in the cylinder of his revolver.

"Drop it, Gunter!" Steve yelled. A bellowing laugh answered him. There would be no surrender here. As Gunter brought the reloaded weapon to bear, Steve pulled the trigger of his leveled gun. The hammer clicked futilely.

The bitter thought flashed through Steve's mind that Jacobs' practice of carrying only five loaded cartridges in his revolver had cost him his life. He braced himself for the shock of the bullet.

There was a spiteful crack from somewhere behind Steve. Gunter's gun-hand dropped. Again came the flat report, and a purple spot appeared on Gunter's forehead. He stood swaying for a moment, then his knees buckled and he went down like a falling tree.

Steve whirled. The supposedly dead yegg was leaning on an elbow, a small automatic in his hand.

"Got 'im, damn 'im!" he snarled weakly. "Run a stick-up into a murder, an' then kill me to cover it, would he!" He sank down on the float. The commissioner had come up and was bending over him. "I'm done, Judge. Plugged through the guts. Listen: Gunter shot that guy Blaney. I never——"

HE WAS still talking when Steve left him. The commissioner would get the details. He went over to the body of the man who had hated him so bitterly through all the years of his life. Deputy Jacobs followed, nursing his wounded arm.

Gunter lay there with his savage face turned to the sky, the old hate still glaring in his sightless eyes. Steve knelt and opened the dead man's shirt. On the massive chest, just above the heart, were the faint blue outlines of three clasped hands. Steve opened the shirt wider and revealed a bloodstained bandage.

"Rheumatism, hell!" grunted Jacobs. "That's where Blaney's bullet hit him, eh? I guess that's why he was wearin' a gun belt tonight instead of a shoulder holster. I thought that was funny. I never knowed him to do it before."

With clanging gong the ambulance rolled up and stopped at the head of the incline. Two white-clad internes from the Karazan hospital, accompanied by Deputy Hallam, came down to the float. One young doctor took charge of the dying yegg, the other went swiftly to where the old deckhand lay.

"This man ought to live," he announced, after a brief examination. "Bad hole in him and lots of blood lost, but nothing vital touched. Who is he?"

The scarfaced man opened his eyes.

"Name's Jack McCane," he said feebly but trimphantly, and lapsed into stupor again.

ASK ME AN OLD ONE!

Dear Soogan:

I suppose you get a lot of letters asking about brands but it is really hard for an Easterner to find out what they are all about. Will you please explain for our benefit the wild sounding branding terms we are always coming across in WEST?

Larry MacAllister,
New York City, N. Y.

YES, we do get a lot of questions about branding and we have answered them in various places, but for the information of new readers we will run over a few of the main points.

In the first place remember that books could be written about brands and not cover them all. In the early days any man could let his imagination run wild in inventing his brand. All kinds of queer figures appeared and were called strange names by their owners. And added to this the Indians began using brands that pictured various bugs and animals. So a man's skill in brand reading doesn't depend so much on calling the brand by the name the owner fancied as on seeing the brand and then recognizing it when seen again. However the various Western states finally stepped in and established brand commissions. These commissions listed all brands and their owners, and thereafter issued brands to those who applied.

Brands are made up of combinations of letters and symbols, or single letters and symbols. Also there are various kinds of letters. An A can be a plain A as printed. It can be a Lazy-A by being on it's side. It can be a Crazy-A by being upside down. Or it can be an open A by not having the little bar between the arms. These same terms also apply to all other letters of the alphabet when possible and also to the numerals.

The symbols used are in most cases obvious. There is the circle and the diamond, both well known. Then there is the bar, a straight horizontal line; the slash, an oblique line; the rafter, two lines meeting over the brand like the rafters of a house; the cross, always made like a plus sign; and others less common such as the heart and arrow head. Then, too, there are such things as "flying," "rocking," "walking" letters. These are made by putting wings, rockers or legs on the figures.

And finally there are thousands and thousands of combinations of the various letters, numerals and symbols. Usually when making a combination all the figures are joined if possible.

The size and location of the brand on the animal are both important considerations. There are three places on each side of a cow where a brand can go—hip, shoulder and flank. Horses can be branded on either hip or shoulder and on the jaw. Horsebrands should be smaller and less disfiguring than cow brands. Many ranches have a special brand for their horses that is different from the one used on their cows.

There are thousands of possible combinations and symbols that I haven't been able to even mention, but the only way to learn them all is to be brand inspector. However, every cowpuncher must be able to spot and read brands and give them some sort of a logical name.

Soogan Sam.

A GRAND OLD WEST

IN THE following letter Clem Yore, writer of those breezy Western novels that are so popular with WEST readers, disagrees with a recent prize winner. Let's hear more on this subject. Tell us what you want, and we'll get it for you or bust our necks trying.

Dear WEST:

I have just finished reading Elizabeth Stader's letter in the current issue wherein she asks for an entire new group of Western stories framed in 1929 settings. She asks for oil yarns, tales of how white grafters steal from Indians, hijacking stories, etc., etc., and then, God bless her, she sets forth a reason which shows she loves and lives the very days she says she doesn't think *apropos* for WEST—the days of the naughty ninety's.

Some of her Oklahoma citizens staged a bank robbery at Lamar, Colorado, a while ago that would have made the Daltons or James boys, Sam Bass, or Cherokee Bill hesitate—and the trick was done in the style of the 90's.

In at least six or seven sections of this country cow stealing, in the mode of the 60's, 70's and 90's is growing at an alarming rate. Why not? A good cow is worth a hundred dollars today. Mrs. Stader must not forget that while Oklahoma is dotted with derricks, in spots, and at many derricks, phones and radios are found; that most of the inter-mountain and coastal states of the Far West are unbroken tracks of wilderness, gashed in five or six spots with railroads and transcontinental highways. Get away from these, fifteen miles, and you're right back in the naughty 90's, sure enough. There are at the very least twenty times as many wild horses in the West today as there were in the best of the wild horse days, and five states have legislated against these animals—still they are on the increase. Why? Because the country is so wild where they run that to catch or kill them takes more time than the game will pay wages for.

Nevada has an area of 110,690 square miles, is sixth in size in the Union; her population is only 77,407, forty-eighth in rank; New Mexico is fourth in size, but only forty-fourth in population, and has three humans to each square mile of territory; Montana is third in size and thirty-ninth in population; my state, Colorado, is seventh in size and last census was thirty-third in population, having nine people to each square mile with three quarters of its people located in about ten towns. And so it goes. It's a grand old West, played in a grand old way, the same old way, but you can't see, hear, sense or feel it if you stick too close to smelly oil wells. You must get out and get into the game, get away from paved highways and into spots where even the Model T will get bogged down.

In olden times our Western boys, good and bad, were pretty good; nowadays their sons, good and bad, are better. Let's have lots of West, and both ways, the modern and the naughty '90 type. And Elizabeth Stader must not forget that this month, at Shawnee, Oklahoma, at the state convention of sheriffs and peace officers, Miss Nell Diester won a pistol shoot with a sure-enough big caliber gun, scoring ninety-three out of a possible one hundred. That's old time Belle Starr stuff. But the main thing is, the West is the West and ever shall be, and all readers want it as *they* think it ought to be.

Cordially, and to a cinder,

Clem Yore.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

500,000 WILD HORSES

THIS clipping from the *Arizona Republican* goes to confirm what Mr. Yore says about wild horses:

Around a half million wild horses are roaming Arizona ranges at the present time, useless for any practical purposes and consuming feed needed by cattle and sheep, according to estimates given the Arizona Industrial Congress by the officials of the Arizona reduction works established here last year for manufacture of poultry scrap and other products from horse meat.

Executives of the company reported that although 8,500 wild horses were bought and killed in its first year's operations, an unlimited supply is available for years to come. They expect to use 15,000 head during the next year, and pointed out that three-fourths of those bought thus far have come from within 100 miles of Phoenix—an area probably less infested than many other sections of the state.

Operation of the reduction works, which has received co-operation of the Congress and stockmen, marks the first major effort made to relieve the problem that has become of much concern to the livestock industry. It is claimed that two horses will consume as much feed as three cows and their calves, and present range conditions have served as an added incentive for their elimination.

Wild horses purchased by the reduction works are used primarily in the manufacture of poultry scrap, other meat going into canned dog food. The company is now planning installation of machinery to produce fish food, for which it declares an almost unlimited demand can be developed from government, state and private fish hatcheries throughout the country. Recently inquiries have been received for horse meat for export to Holland, and keen demand for young horse hides has developed from Los Angeles, where they are made into ladies' coats.

SAVING THE LONGHORNS

RECENTLY we published an article telling about the Government's attempts to keep the purebred longhorns from becoming extinct. That others are interested in this movement is evidenced by the following newspaper item.

George W. Saunders has given two old longhorn steers four months' lease on life. These two old steers were bought by the late Henry Edds of Hebbronville, thirteen years ago in Hidalgo County, when they were one and two years olds and they are now about fourteen and fifteen years old. They have been held in the Edds' pasture near Hebbronville since then, as a reminder of the early Texas cattle.

George Edds, son of the original owner, sold them to Hancock & Hotchkis of San Antonio in a car of cattle, reserving their heads and horns. On their arrival at San Antonio Saunders bought the steers then phoned Edds and got the privilege of holding them for four months, as he wanted to take them to the Old Trail Drivers' Reunion in October. Saunders sent them to his ranch, twelve miles from San Antonio on the Medina River where they were placed on fine grass under good shade with plenty of fine water, to enjoy the last days of their life.

Saunders, like all other stockmen, knows that this class of cattle cannot be raised for a profit now, but thinks that they should be remembered for what they did for Texas during the trail-driving period, when 10,000,000 of them were driven to the Northern markets. Texas stockmen realized $250,000,000 from this source, the first "real money" that Texas ever had.

After these old steers attend the Old Trail Drivers' Reunion in October and greet their many friends there, they will be slaughtered and their heads mounted and sent to Edds.

There are very few longhorn steers left in Texas, but L. A. Schreiner of Kerrville does not intend for them to become extinct in the near future. Saunders bought sixteen cows and a bull for him last year, and Schreiner put them on his reserve at Kerrville. Not one of these cattle had a bit of improved blood in it. The Government has placed several hundred on a reserve in Oklahoma in order to prevent the breed from becoming extinct.

PIZEN OAK SEZ

THE government shows a lotta in-t'rest in wuthless old longhorn beef critters puttin' 'em on good pasture an' all—but I don't see no movement to put old stove-up cow prodders like myself on good feed fer the rest o' their life. Wal, I s'pose they figger thar ain't no danger of the breed becomin' extinct.

TOM ROAN

YES—all you print-hungry WEST fans—he's back on page three of this issue. No one else but *Tom Roan* his-ownself—an' he's back with the kind of a gun-slammin', hot-action, he-man novel that you can expect from the pen of this popular builder of Western stories. *Mr. Roan* hasn't been in the pages of WEST for some while, but I reckon you'll all agree that *Horsethief Pass* was worth waiting for.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Driv' by Old Pizen Oak)

FELLERS, I wants to speak serious fer a minute an' call your attention to a partic'lar novelette in the October 16th number of WEST. This story is by *Foster Harris.* He's named it *Poison Pool.*

Poison Pool is an oilfield in the Southwest. It's a booming field and full of hard-boiled oilmen, and all the hangers-on that go with booms. The towns there make the goin's on in Chicago and Cicero look like a pink tea!

This novelette is about life an' death an' loyalty in this here tough district. It's about a husky driller named Blaze Gardner and his fight with the three Sinter Brothers. I'd like to tell you 'bout this here fight—what brung it about an' how it come out—but I don't wanta spile the story fer yuh.

Leastways I'm sayin' this much. *Poison Pool* will take you right down to the oilfields, an' plunk yuh right in the midst of the big-hearted fightin' men, the oil-fever, and the excitement that's thar a-plenty.

WEST has never published a story that will hit yuh harder and deeper nor *Poison Pool* by *Foster Harris.*

Not to mention Geehosifat Jones, the easy-goin', good-hearted hombre from the Texas border, the creation o' the teemin' brain of *George C. Henderson.* Geehosifat may be easy-goin' but he's sure there when the guns start thunderin'.

Geehosifat stars this trip in a long, complete, wind-takin', heart-breakin' novel, featurin' a rodeo, a riot an' a rampage!!!

Miss the Gunslick From Hellangone if yuh wanta—but you'll miss a wallopin' good yarn if you do.

Then we got Part III o' *Gun Justice,* by this time famous Western serial by *Bill Colt MacDonald*—starrin' Melody Madigan, top-rope o' the Rafter-S.

An' you'll be plumb tickled to larn that Anse Curtin, the lazy cowpoke, is back in a trouble-bustin' story called *Plumb Salty* by *Walter A. Sinclair.*

Not to fergit *To the Last Drop,* a whale of a cowboy, horse-racin' yarn by *George Cory Franklin*—which knows his horses from frog to poll; a battlin' short story, name o' *Stormy Peace* by *Ralph Cummins; Up Under the High Country* by *Hal Davenport,* a snowy, blowy piece featurin' a cattle association cop; and last but not by no means least is *He Told 'Em Tall,* a yarn by *Jack Wonder,* that has one of his real and onusual characters in, an' just makes yuh think you're right out on the open range wranglin' a bunch o' cattle. Boy, when *Jack Wonder* talks about cow work you kin hear the saddles creak an' hear the clackin' hoofs—an' no two ways about that.

All this in the October 2nd WEST which settles down onto the newsstands on September 18th—no sooner an' no later.

Come an' git it 'fore I throw it out!

Oct. 2-29

$25.00 PRIZE LETTER

You all know that WEST is giving a prize of $25.00 cash every two weeks for the best letter from a reader, don't you? Everyone has a chance—no date limits—a new prize every issue! The letter can be about anything in the West (either the country or the magazine). It can be facts, suggestions, criticism, or history—but it must be interesting. Don't fail to try your luck!

THE money goes this time to a man who has formed a "West Club."

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

An institution for the blind is probably the last place you would expect WEST to be read and enjoyed. But you would be wrong. Some months ago, threatened with blindness, I located in the Blind Men's Club run by the New York Association for the Blind. Since then my sight has greatly improved. Indeed, I'm permitted to read an hour or two a day. As WEST had been my pet magazine prior to my affliction, I lost no time in returning to my old love. What happiness its bright and thrilling pages brought me!

Not being of a hoggish disposition I proceeded to pass the good thing along. A group of six formed what might be termed a *West Club*. We gather in the smoking room, right after dinner, and I read aloud while my auditors listen eagerly and puff contentedly. The group has increased in size since its birth, until now it numbers fourteen dyed-in-the-wool WEST fans. With what intense interest they all listen! To some it is a breath from the past; to all it is an absorbing portrayal of what is forever closed to them. And how they argue when I've finished for the evening.

They have much time for debate, and they sure debate. It's illuminating and informative to hear them. Every character is interpreted from a different angle; every plot is extolled by some and condemned by others; every author is at once a target for praise and censure. It would warm your heart to watch and listen to these blind men; it would make you almost weep to see with what pathetic eagerness they drink in the stirring deeds of strong men as pictured in WEST.

Kind-hearted people come here certain nights in the week and read newspapers, but their efforts to entertain run second to mine with WEST. Pride, satisfaction and pleasure I derive from my introduction of WEST to the Blind Men's Club.

Sincerely,
Will Douglas.

605 First Avenue,
Manhattan, N. Y.

AND here is one from "a cowman from away back."

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

I aim to corral a few lines to let you know what we out here think about WEST and the West. I'm a Westerner, born and raised in Dakota, and my family have been connected with the cattle business since the Indians tamed up enough to make it possible for cattle raising to go on.

We're in the Black Hills, a country of rough and timbered canyons and gulches where boulders and pines and creeks get all tangled up together. Most of it now is forest reserve, where cattle still range—but I can remember well, when it was all "open." And many's the time I've heard about rustlers running off the cows to hide them in some of these wild canyons, and change the brands, or maybe run them off over the line into Wyoming and sell the beef. I know a dead ringer not only for "Dry Spring Jack" in "Cattle Business" in a recent issue, but for "Toyah" as well. That is a peach of a story and sounds like the real thing.

Sometimes I read Westerns that don't feel like the West, the romance and glamour are all just branded on the hide, sort of. But the stories in WEST *are* the West, the big herds, the riding, singing cowboys, big men made big by a big country. There's a free swing and a tang to your stuff that makes us think the writers have "been there" and are living over something they love when they write about it all.

Yours truly,
F. H. Brockett.

1024 Quincy Street,
Rapid City, South Dakota.

AN' SPEAKIN' of Poison Pool, how's this for a letter about oil-field fire-fightin'?

Morris, Oklahoma.
July 16, 1929.

Editor, West,
Dear Sir:

Just received my new WEST, and as usual I read the prize letter first. Yes I always start reading my magazine from the back cover.

I must have missed reading Mr. Clifton and Mr McVey's letter, but L. E. D.'s letter was just fine for the prize. He wanted to tell us about shooting oil wells and he gave us a wonderful introduction to Tex Thorton. He surely is a marvelous gent and we are proud to know him.

But let a girl give L. E. D. the latest on the soldier method of fighting large oil fires. You will want to know how a girl knows so much on oil fires when she can't be an oil field worker.

Neiter is a Western girl a cowboy but she knows how to ride a horse just the same.

So here goes the Soldiers' Method.

The fighters are often oil field workers trained especially for this work. Methods and equipment of world war soldiers aid them in their precarious undertaking of fighting expensive blazes caused by ignited gushers.

Earthworks, trenches and barricades are built, sappers put to work tunnelling, airplane propellers brought into use to divert the intense heat and gas mask and protective clothing worn. Fire fighting thus becomes nearly as costly as warfare, for in addition to cost of equipment there is diverted to the sole purpose of battling the flames the labor and ingenuity of hundreds of men who ordinarily would be employed in the profitable business of producing oil. But this is less costly than to let millions of barrels of oil and gas burn

The Laugh Corral

Stranger: *"Sheriff, have you seen a buckskin horse pass through here lately?"*
Sheriff: *No! Was he broke?"*
Stranger: *"No, there was three months' pay in the saddlebag."*

I wonder if seein's is keepin' in this one from George Strong, Berwinsdale, Penn.

(West will pay $2.50 for each joke or short, funny verse or limerick, not exceeding six lines, suitable for use on this page. Owing to the number of contributions received, West cannot acknowledge receipt of nor return these unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.)

to waste and destroy valuable property.

Precaution is taken to prevent oil field fires, but there is an ever present danger of lightning, static, electricity, carelessness and other sources. Ordinary fire fighting with water is futile and only spreads the oil.

Often a double offensive is taken; an earth barricade topped by a metal shield is built some distance from the flames and airplane motors equipped with propellers are started in front of it to turn the heat from the workers.

A tunnel is dug from the surface to a point far below the top of the well casing, then a chamber is built around the tubing so that a casing may be tapped and the oil and gas diverted into pipes laid on the floor of the tunnel.

Men on the surface, wearing asbestos suits, kept wet by fire hose and fanned by the propellers, attempt to install a pipe and valve mechanism which will enable them to shut off the flow of fuel. Sudden death is faced every minute, from flames or explosions, especially when the shut off valve is closed.

I wonder if Tex uses this method now? He's been at the game a long time. Also I hope L. E. D. of Texas sees this in print.

Now that I have finished my letter I will settle down to peaceful moments with "WEST." This *shore* is a fine magazine and we girls are taking an interest.

Wishing WEST the best of luck, I remain,

Truly a constant reader,

MRS. H. M. S.,
Morris, Okla.

(If you have trouble in getting your regular copy of West, please speak to your newsdealer about the matter, or write directly to West Magazine, Garden City, New York.)

Do You Ever Read
SHORT STORIES?

Readers of WEST will want to read the coming issues of SHORT STORIES with serials by

Clarence Mulford
William MacLeod Raine
H. Bedford Jones
Frank L. Packard
and Bertrand Sinclair

There will also be complete long stories by many of the favorites, including

W. C. Tuttle
Ernest Haycox
L. Patrick Greene
George F. Worts
J. D. Newsom
J. Allan Dunn
Homer King Gordon
Frederick Moore

In addition you will find many of the best short stories in each issue—ask your dealer for a copy of the current issue.

SHORT STORIES
on the 10th and 25th

3 GENUINE Axminster RUGS for $9.65

27 X 52 IN.

TOTAL BARGAIN PRICE

Send Only **$1.00 DOWN**

Please accept this "get-acquainted" offer without the slightest obligation. We know what an UNUSUAL value this is and we are willing to prove it to you entirely at our risk. Send only $1.00 deposit with the coupon below and we'll ship these 3 handsome Axminster Rugs to your home for

30 Days Trial

Yes, we want you to see what a wonderful bargain this is and see if you can match this value anywhere else, even for spot cash. We want to show you, too, how easy and convenient it is to deal with Straus & Schram by mail, how we ***save you money*** on everything for the home and give easy monthly payments besides. Once you've tried our way of shopping, we are confident you will buy from us always as thousands of others all over the country have done for 47 years. But we leave that to you. If, after 30 days trial, you are not *delighted* with these rugs, with the quality, the beauty, the bargain value, send them back ***at our expense,*** and we'll refund your dollar deposit plus all transportation charges. Fair enough, isn't it?

Soft, Thick Axminsters

These rugs are extra thick, high pile, genuine Axminsters. **Only $9.65** for all three on this offer; they would be good value at $13.50 cash.

All 3 are of identical quality—expertly woven of wool face yarns. Each pattern is distinctive in design and coloring. Soft, rich, harmonizing colors, guaranteed absolutely fast. Size of rugs 27x52 in., easy to handle and clean. There's a place in every home for these exquisite rugs; here and there in the living room, at door entrances, in bedrooms, dining room, bath or over any bare spot. Will stand hardest wear. Shpg. wght. about 10 lbs.

Order by No. C6307A
$1.00 with coupon;
$1.00 monthly.
Price for 3 only $9.65

$1.00 a Month

But if you decide to keep the 3 Rugs, just send us $1.00 a month until you have paid our sensational sale price—only $9.65. Isn't that an EASY way to buy? And save money, besides!

Please don't delay for we have only a limited supply of rugs for this bargain offer and we wouldn't like to have you miss this opportunity.

Send Coupon NOW!

Straus & Schram, Dept. 4407 Chicago

Free Catalog *of home furnishings sent with or without order. See coupon.*

Send Now!

Straus & Schram, Dept. 4407 Chicago, Ill.

Enclosed find $1. Send me the 3 genuine Axminster rugs as advertised. I am to have 30 days free trial. If I keep the rugs I will pay you $1.00 monthly. If not satisfied I am to return the rugs within 30 days and you are to refund my money plus any transportation charges I paid.

3 Axminster Rugs No. C6307A—$9.65

Name _____

Street, R. F. D. or Box No. _____

Shipping Point _____

Post Office _____ *State* _____

Married or Single _____ *Nationality or Color* _____

If you want ONLY our free catalog of home furnishings mark X here ☐

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER